THE HORUS HERESY®

THE SILENT WAR

Chosen of the Sigillite

Featuring stories by James Swallow, Chris Wraight, John French, Graham McNeill and more

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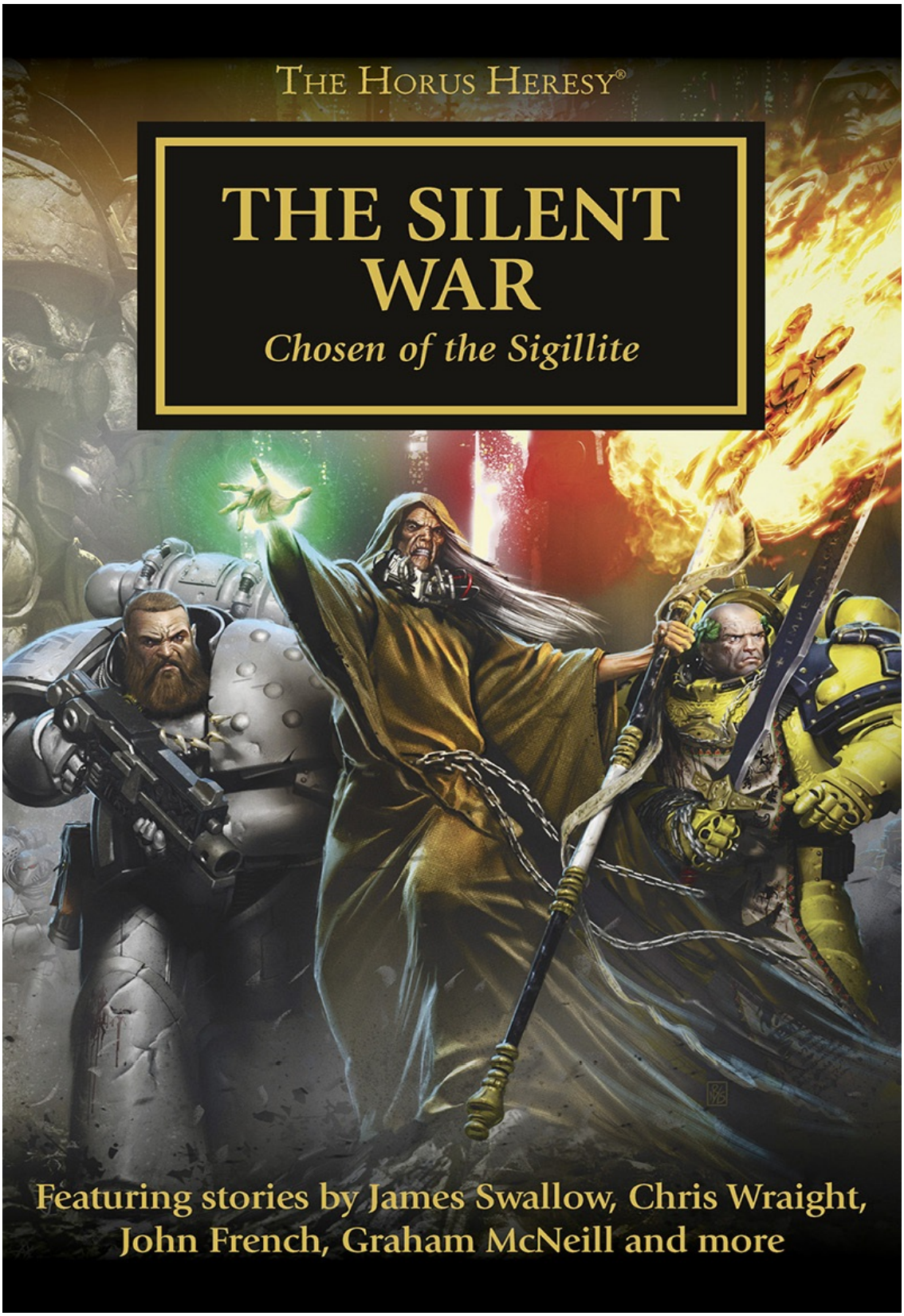
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THE HORUS HERESY®

THE SILENT WAR

Chosen of the Sigillite

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

‘Know then that the past has two faces – one bright and bloody and known by all, the other shadowed and hidden, its features lost in time. That forgotten face, the face that no one will ever see, that is the true face of history. The face of the Silent War.’

– attrib. unknown legionary of the Dark Angels, c.M31

THE PURGE

Anthony Reynolds

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

Sor Talgron, Captain of the 34th Company, and representative of Lorgar on Terra

Jarulek, Chaplain, and later Dark Apostle

Ahraneth, 34th Company standard bearer

Dal Ahk, Master of Signal

Loth, Reconnaissance sergeant

Telakhas, Line-breaker sergeant

Urhlan, Apothecary

Volkhar Wreth, Predicant, serving in the Crusader Host

The XIII Legion 'Ultramarines'

Aecus Decimus, Chapter Master, 17th Chapter

Connor, Sergeant, 170th Company

Naxor, Techmarine, 170th Company

Tillus Victorius, 171st Company champion

Vaul Agregius, Veteran battle-brother, 171st Company

Freia Solontine, Admiral, commander of the *Righteous Fury*

Romus, Veteran battle-brother, 170th Company [marked]

Paulus, Sky Hunter, 172nd Company [marked]

Xion Octavion, Battle-brother, 174th Company [marked]

Sio, Battle-brother, 175th Company [marked]

Korolos, Former captain, 178th Company [marked]

The Defenders of Terra

ROGAL DORN, Primarch of the Imperial Fists, and the Emperor's Praetorian
ARCHAMUS, Master of Dorn's huscarls
TIBER ACANTHUS, Custodian Guard
NATHANIEL GARRO, Former battle-captain of the Death Guard

‘Violence does, in truth, recoil upon the violent, and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another.’

– attributed to the pre-Unity prophet Dhoyalle

PROLOGUE

456008.M31 – Percepton System, Ultramar

The legionary writhed on the apothecarion's slab. Skinless, raw and bleeding, he more closely resembled one of the Dwellers Beyond than anything of human birth.

His flesh had run like wax, giving it a wet, glossy-slick appearance. His features had melted and blurred together, making it look as though he wore a grotesque cult mask. His eye sockets were tortured red pits, burned tear trails all that remained of his liquefied eyeballs, and what was left of his mouth opened and closed in agony. Strings of melted flesh linked his lips – or at least where his lips had been.

Servo-cutters, diamond-tipped drills and mono-saws cut away the smoking sections of his ruined Mark III plate. Each piece fell with a resounding crash, splattering blood and oil across the pristine white floor. The legionary's flesh had fused with his armour, and he thrashed and mewled as it was shorn away – peeled from him like the exoskeleton of a beetle, exposing yet more mutilation beneath. Hot vapours rose from the exposed, bloody ruin, stinking of acidic chemical fire and cooked meat.

He was not alone; every slab within the apothecarion was occupied, and scores of legionaries had been dumped wherever space allowed it. The groans and roars of the dying and wounded blended with the background noise of frantic orders, bone saws, life support systems, hypo-injectors and synth-skin applicators.

Needles, feeder cables and stims were rammed into his veins and spinal column and a re-breather tube shoved down his throat. He went into convulsions, his

blood pressure dropped markedly, and alarms began to whine.

With a burst of fevered strength, he tore free of the restraints holding him down. As medicae attendants rushed forward, he yanked the re-breather tube from his throat and clutched at the nearest Apothecary with a waxen claw-like hand, pulling him close. The abused muscles of his neck bulged like wet cables as he strained forward.

He gargled something indecipherable, splattering blood across the Apothecary's faceplate.

The attendants struggled to hold him down. Even wounded as he was, they were as children against his augmented strength. His grip was like iron.

'Urhlan,' he snarled, eyeless sockets boring into the Apothecary. 'Do… not… *inter* me.'

In answer, Apothecary Urhlan pressed his wrist-mounted narthecium to the patient's neck, injecting more doses of powerful narcotics into his bloodstream. The legionary's grip went slack, fingers twitching.

Apothecary Urhlan stepped back and the medicae attendants finally managed to secure their charge with new restraints. Blood coated his arms and chest – not all of it was his patient's. His white armour was acid-scarred and malfunctioning, sparks leaping from damaged joints and servos, and he moved with a pronounced limp. He had barely made it off-world himself, and he'd already been aboard his evacuation shuttle when everything had gone wrong.

'Will he live?'

Urhlan glanced back to the one who had spoken; the Dark Apostle, Jarulek. He stood with arms crossed over his chest. There were a handful of other officers and legionaries clustered around the slab. All of them bore evidence of battle, and most sported wounds of varying severity.

'I am surprised he is even alive now,' Urhlan said, making a vain attempt to wipe the blood from his helmet's visor lenses. 'I was surprised that he was alive when he got here.'

'But can you save him?'

Urhlan looked down at his patient, writhing on the slab before him.

'No,' he said.

'Then his fate is in the gods' hands,' said Jarulek.

Urhlan turned back towards the now comatose, twitching mass of chem-melted flesh on the slab before him. It was hard to believe that this was his captain.

'Get out,' he said over his shoulder. 'Let me work. I will do what I can.'

ONE

454008.M31 – Percepton System, Ultramar

The war had been won in twenty-seven minutes, though the battle still raged on one hundred and sixty-three days later.

Twenty-seven minutes. That had been how long it had taken for his ships to cripple the Ultramarines fleet above Percepton Primus. The enemy had not yet heard about Calth, nor of Armatura, Talassar, or any of the countless other warzones targeted as part of the Shadow Crusade.

The chronometer had clicked over, and he had given the order.

The Word Bearers struck. Over half the enemy flotilla was lost in the opening salvoes, the rest in the hours and days after. The wreckage now orbited the capital planet, the heart of this system.

Thus, the war for Percepton was won in twenty-seven minutes. In the months that followed, all that remained was to complete the cull.

One hundred and sixty-four days after that initial strike, the world of Percepton Primus ended.

132006.M31 – Terra

From orbit it was possible to see the coastlines that once delineated the continents of old Terra. The vast ocean tracts that had covered the globe were gone, vaporised during the long internecine nuke-wars that almost obliterated humanity in bygone ages, but the original shapes could still be vaguely discerned, like ghosts of the past – though most clearly in darkness.

It was the lights that revealed them. While the entire planet shone like a beacon in the void, lit by the glow of the hives, megacities and highways. The lights were brightest upon the old continents – the darker tracts of land marked where the seas had once been – or along the straight, unnaturally angular coastlines of the newer, artificial oceans.

Ethereal green aurorae shimmered over the southern horizon, while great chem-storms shrouded the rad-scarred lands to the north, flickering with an almost constant strobe of lightning. It was not in those directions that the lander was headed, however. As its golden wings unfolded and the glow of re-entry faded from its thermal shields, it angled its descent towards the very roof of the world.

Within the enclosed cabin, Sor Talgron sat alone, looking out of the viewport. One immense grey-gauntleted hand shielded his view from the shuttle's interior illumination.

'Refreshment, captain?'

Sor Talgron glanced away from the port. The interior of the shuttle was all gently curved surfaces, subtle lighting and neutral tones. His synth-leather seat was large enough to accommodate his oversized bulk in considerable comfort. The remaining eleven passenger seats were unoccupied, though there were others on board. Even though he could not currently see them, he could taste their gene-forged scent in the recycled air – at once familiar and yet strange – as well as sense the faint hum of their armour.

The attendant who had spoken was unnaturally tall and willowy, and her large, oval eyes were milky orbs, bereft of pupils. Gene-manipulation had given her this form, though for what purpose he could not fathom. Perhaps humans found her appearance pleasing to the eye. Perhaps they tampered with her genes simply because they could.

'Sweet nectar? Amasec?' she said, gesturing languidly at the refrigerated cart that hovered before her. 'Something else?'

He shook his head and turned back towards the viewport. He saw his own reflection there, frowning back at him. While he was not sure what a human would find appealing in the soft, pale features of the shuttle attendant, he knew what they would find unattractive about his own.

His face was square and hard. Brutish. It was not the face of a scholar or a statesman. A lifetime of battle had flattened his features, and ugly scarring criss-crossed his face and scalp. His own role in the universe could not be mistaken. He was a warrior, a soldier, a killer. It was what he had been made for, a role he

had been genetically altered to perform, and it was what he was good at. It was his purpose.

Servo-motors in the joints of his armour whined as he leaned in close to the glass once more, blotting out the glare and his own grim reflection. His eyes scanned the world below as the shuttle's descent levelled. He saw the burning thrusters of golden interceptor escorts flying off the wing tip, guiding them in.

Sor Talgron stared unblinking, absorbing all that he saw. It was still some time before he would arrive at his destination, flying over the single largest man-made structure the universe had ever seen. Even so, on the very outskirts of that immense continent-spanning mega-structure, it was apparent to Sor Talgron that it was being fundamentally altered.

When he had left Terra the structure below had been a palace. He returned to find it well on the way to being transformed into a fortress.

Sor Talgron walked through fire, flanked by Ahraneth, his standard bearer, and Dal Ahk, master of signal. All three wore dark crimson armour, the colour of pooled blood. The heavy war-plate had received the new Legion colours while en route to Ultramar, but it did not sit well with him. It felt like a betrayal of the Legion's past.

Around them, centuries of learning and wisdom were being destroyed, filling the scorched air with ash and the fluttering pages of burning books. Thousands of texts and codices were forever lost as librarium data banks were put to the torch, circuitry and silicon-based memory cores melting and crackling in the flames.

Sor Talgron did not mourn this loss.

The great chamber was filled with dust. Clearly, it had been abandoned after the Nikaea edict came into effect. It was highly probable that none had walked its halls since that time.

Until today, when it had become a battleground.

Flames licked at his pauldrons as he strode through the aftermath of the battle, coloured glass crunching underfoot. The immense glassaic windows that had looked down upon the cavernous Librarius atrium would have been an early casualty in the battle for the city of Massilea.

Bodies turned to ragged meat by bolter fire lay splattered across the floor and against the walls. Four Word Bearers were dead, dropped by kill-shots. Several others were down, being attended by the Legion's Apothecaries. Two bore fatal injuries and were given release, their prayers dying upon their lips. The gene-

seed of the dead was extracted, reductors whirring, spitting bone and blood.

A number of the fallen Ultramarines were not yet gone, but there were no XIII Legion Apothecaries to come to their aid, nor any living battle-brothers to drag them to safety. In another battalion, perhaps, their lives would have ended in torment after countless hours of agony and ritual debasement – but Sor Talgron would have none of that, and they were despatched without ceremony.

They were the enemy, and he would do everything in his power to see them defeated, utterly and completely. But he could not hate them, and he would not see them tortured needlessly.

There was much to admire about the XIII Legion. Their cohesion and discipline in battle was enviable, their execution beyond compare. They were without a doubt the most effective fighting force that Sor Talgron had ever faced, and he respected them greatly.

'It is Erebus' wish that every enemy taken alive be sacrificed to feed the Ruinstorm,' Jarulek had stated at the outset of the system war. *'This is to be done across all the Five Hundred Worlds.'*

'Erebus be damned,' had been Sor Talgron's response. *'The snake does not command me. My orders are to kill this world. I will do it my way.'*

He walked from the atrium, past soaring white marble pillars pocked and cratered by bolter fire. Beyond was a broad semi-circular terrace, bordered by natural stone and immaculately maintained foliage now churned to ruin. A waterfall fell into a pool in the rock, where bodies floated face down. Sweeping marble stairs descended to lower levels of the concourse.

Sor Talgron walked past a towering white statue depicting a robed figure in a thoughtful, seated pose.

An Ultramarines legionary lay on the ground. He had been cut in half by gunfire; his lower torso and legs were nearby. Blood had pooled beneath him, and his insides were spilled out onto the terrace, but he was alive. Legionaries did not die easily.

Ahraneth levelled his bolt pistol at him.

'No,' said Sor Talgron, and his standard bearer lowered his weapon.

The Ultramarine was of a centurion's rank – a fellow captain, as indicated by the insignia on his shoulder plates. He was clasping his innards with one hand, trying vainly to hold them in, while with his other he was dragging himself along the ground. A volkite serpenta pistol lay nearby. He fumbled for it. Even as he died, he sought a weapon to use against his enemies.

Sor Talgron's boot crunched down on his wrist, and he stooped to pick up the

serpenta himself. He turned it over in his hands.

'This is a good weapon,' he said.

The Ultramarine looked up at him. His helmet was in place. A Mark IV variant, some Ultramar-localised pattern. Its once-pristine cobalt-blue surface and gold-rimmed edges were splattered with blood, rich and bright. A golden wreath had been painted around the temples, some battle honour that Sor Talgron did not recognise.

'Why?' asked the legionary. His voice was crackling and bled with static.

Sor Talgron placed the barrel of the volkite pistol to the Ultramarine's visor lens, aiming it squarely into his left eye. 'Why what?'

'Why do you do this?'

Sor Talgron squeezed the trigger. The back of the Ultramarine's helmet exploded, and the floor beneath lit up in flame.

'Because I am ordered to,' he said.

TWO

Chapter Master Aecus Decimus of the Ultramarines Legion, 17th Chapter, planted one heavy boot upon the traitor's chest and wrenched his blade free. The short sword slid from the enemy's vox-grille with a wet scrape, and the red-armoured legionary collapsed, joining the blanket of others upon the blood-churned earth.

Choking smoke clouded his vision, the chemicals and blinding micro-particles within it making his eyes sting and his throat burn. Visibility had been reduced to a matter of metres. Augury scanners were rendered useless by the shrouding fog. He had no notion of where the battle lines lay, but it hardly mattered. The engagement had completely lost its shape. The time for strategy had passed.

Another enemy was upon him. He batted aside the legionary's screaming chainsword and pressed the barrel of his bolt pistol to the Word Bearer's chest. The force of the detonation hurled the traitor backwards, and he ended up on the ground four metres back, a deep crater in his ruptured gorget. Decimus' second shot ended him, taking him between helm and breastplate. The detonation almost tore his head from his body.

The neck seal was one of the few locations in the newer marks of armour where bolt weaponry could achieve a clean kill from a distance. He had never seen the effects of bolt weaponry upon legionary power armour prior to this campaign – as far as he knew, no one within the XIII Legion had even considered such an eventuality. The mere thought would have been abhorrent. Now that legionary-

legionary engagement was a practical, they had been forced to revise their tactics.

Future marks of power armour would likely be designed to cover such deficiencies, the Techmarine Naxor had predicted. High gorgets, like those of the Cataphractii, would likely be integrated into line plate, he had said, just moments before he was dismembered by a Word Bearers legionary draped in human flesh. That these treacherous savages had ever been called their kin made him want to retch.

The battle had devolved into a savage melee. All around him, legionaries in the crimson of the reborn Word Bearers and the noble blue of the Ultramarines were dying. The scale of the slaughter was galling. There would be no retreat, not from this battle. They would fight and die to the last. All that mattered now was to hold the enemy here long enough. What had started as long-ranged tank battles and lightning-swift assaults had been reduced to slogging through the mud and hacking at the enemy with blunted swords and toothless chainswords. He saw one of his veterans – Vaul Agregius, the Victor of Staxus – gun down a Word Bearer mouthing vile curses, silencing the wounded traitor with a final bolt to the head. Another veteran punched a XVII Legion warrior into the smoking carcass of a desecrated Land Raider, pulping him beneath his energy-encased power fist.

An Ultramarine nearby was dragged down into the mud, his attacker repeatedly stabbing a jagged-bladed knife into his throat until he was still. That Word Bearer was in turn ripped apart by heavy bolter fire, but there were always more, marching out of the fog and intoning their mournful chants.

Evil had rooted itself within the psyche of the XVII Legion. It was the only explanation that Decimus had for what they had become.

The silent company champion, Tillus Victorius, fought like he did in the duelling cages, favouring a small combat shield and gladius opposite his power sword. He was masterful to watch. He took a blow upon his buckler and spun, cutting a Word Bearer down at the knees before despatching him with a cross-bladed decapitating strike.

The champion had never been beaten blade-to-blade, but as he turned to find a new foe, a stray bolt from out of the smoke took him in the eye. It punched through his left visor lens and detonated in his brain pan. He fell without a sound, blades slipping into the mud from his lifeless fingers. The warrior had been almost obsessive in his training. That had counted for nothing at the last. It was an ignoble end.

Decimus stared down at the champion's corpse, and hatred coursed through him. He had never known such depth of feeling. He had never hated any of the xenos that he'd fought during the Great Crusade, nor even the recalcitrant humans of those worlds that defied the Emperor's dominion. He had felt pity for some of these misguided civilisations, disgust or apathy for others, but never *hatred*.

His heavily artificed armour was barely functional. It was running on auxiliary power, and little of its surface still bore the proud cobalt-blue of his Legion, so scorched, dented and cratered were its plates. His left shoulder was a mangled ruin, spitting angry sparks and internal servos grinding incessantly. He could feel bone grinding on bone in the joint. He wore no helm – he had torn it loose after it had borne the brunt of a power maul swing earlier in the battle – and the left side of his face was crusted with congealed blood.

The Chapter Master was bone-tired. It had been more than a week since he'd had any rest. For a second there were no enemies running at him, and he wanted nothing more than to drop to his haunches and lean back up against the dead Word Bearers Land Raider… but no. Even now, even as the end closed in with the inevitability of the setting suns, he needed to be seen, defiant and bellicose until the last.

He checked his ammunition. Four bolts. He slammed the clip back into his pistol. He would make each one count.

The ground shook with explosions, the grind of heavy tracks and what felt like an earthquake, but he knew the latter to be the thunderous footfall of Titans. He could hear them calling to each other with deafening blares of their warhorns, drowning out the pounding of artillery, the chatter of gunfire, the screams of the dying and the clash of blades. The eardrum-shattering roar of their weapons sounded intermittently, and when they did he felt sick thinking of the noble sons of Ultramar being cut down in swathes, like wheat before the reaper.

Communications were down, even the closed Ultramarine vox-channels now infected with insidious whispers, screams and hellish warpsound. But he knew that his captains would be doing him proud, punishing the Word Bearers in this, the last XIII Legion push of the war.

A shout from the rear drew his attention. Squinting into the smoke, he saw enemy figures emerging from the haze behind them. They had been flanked. His captains barked orders, but little could be done as Ultramarines were cut down, already caught in the savage crossfire.

A diminished heavy support squad turned to face this new threat, swinging their

autocannons around and planting their feet wide. Even as two of their number were dropped, they unleashed their fury into the enemy, tearing through their ranks and buying time for other squads to get into cover. The barrels of their guns were soon glowing red-hot. Still they pounded the enemy, forcing them down into the mud.

An armoured figure crashed down through the smoke from above, bright flames gushing from his overworked jump pack. The Word Bearer landed in a crouch behind the heavy support squad, one knee and one hand planted to the ground for stability. More of them slammed down around the first, smoke venting from their jump pack stacks. The first gunner sensed the enemy behind him and made to turn, but he was too slow. The Word Bearer was rising, chainaxe screaming.

Chapter Master Aecus Decimus was already up and running, his command squad one step behind. His shot hit the first enemy legionary in the side of the head. It deflected off before detonating, knocking him off-balance. Then Decimus was upon him, tackling him into the mud as he recovered. The Word Bearer's chainaxe went flying.

They rolled, slipping and sliding down a muddy incline. Decimus lost his pistol but still had hold of his power blade. As they came to rest at the bottom of the slope, in a ditch filled with armoured corpses, Decimus was on top. He tried to go for the killing blow, but his enemy's hand was clasped around his vambrace, holding the blade at bay. The Word Bearer slammed his armoured fist into Decimus' jaw, dislocating it and fracturing bone.

He was momentarily dazed, and the Word Bearer pressed that advantage. He rolled atop Decimus, pinning him face down in the mud and gripping the back of his head. The Chapter Master tried to free himself, losing his grasp on his blade in the process, but he could not dislodge the traitor. His face was slammed into the ground, again and again. Mud and blood filled his eyes.

'Now you die,' snarled the Word Bearer. His voice was so twisted that he sounded more like a beast than anything that had ever been human.

Then, in the thunder of close-range autocannon fire, his head disappeared in a red mist.

Decimus wiped mud and blood from his eyes as he rose, scrabbling back up the slope to his frantic command squad under covering fire from the last remaining heavy weapon-toting legionaries.

He threw a glance skyward. He could see nothing, but he knew it must be approaching the appointed time. His adjutant saw his glance.

'Are you sure about this, my lord?' he said.

‘I am,’ said Decimus. ‘May the Emperor forgive me.’

They escorted him off the shuttle like a prisoner, two in front, two behind. They were nestled in the high foothills of Terra’s most dominant peaks, though he could not see them now; the articulated docking clamps attached to the shuttle’s hull had no windows.

He was unarmed, as per their order. It had been phrased as a request, but it had been an order nonetheless. He stared resolutely forward as he was marched from the shuttle. Flexible jointed walls gave way to an armoured corridor as he entered the palace.

His slate-grey war-plate was unadorned. Only the deep-red crest of his helm, tucked under one arm, gave any indication of his senior Legion rank. His armour was old and well-worn, the plates thick and heavy. It was the armour of a soldier, practical and utilitarian, and its surface revealed evidence of frequent repair. He bore those marks like battle scars. Each scratch and dent had a story.

In contrast, the four members of the Legio Custodes escorting him into the palace wore highly ornate armour of burnished gold, replete with decorative lightning bolts and eagles. Long fur-lined cloaks hung from their gilded shoulders, and their features were hidden behind tall, conical helms. Their armour was more finely artificed than Sor Talgron’s humble plate, but it was not parade armour. This was the most highly advanced battle armour that the most skilled tech-priests of Mars had been able to devise – light, strong and nigh impervious to conventional firearms, and allowing greater freedom of movement than Legion plate.

Each bore a guardian spear, the signature weapon of their order. Gilded halberds with inbuilt firearms, they were curious and exotic weapons. They would have been unwieldy in untrained hands, but even at rest, he could see that they were almost extensions of the Custodians’ bodies. They would be wielded with consummate skill, and while Sor Talgron had only seen them used in training, he judged that the key to fighting the Legio Custodes would be for an enemy to get inside their effective range.

He felt no particular bonds of kinship with the Legio Custodes. They were as different from him as unaugmented humans, for all their shared similarities in gene-heritage. The divisions between the two strands of transhumanity were stark, even if an outsider might have been blind to them – in the main it was not a physical difference, even though the Custodians might seem uniformly taller in stature. They were simply a breed apart.

The true strength of the Legiones Astartes was their unity of purpose, and the bonds of brotherhood they shared. Perhaps that was why they had insisted that Sor Talgron travel to the surface alone, the rest of his company ship-bound at high anchor. The Custodians might be individual warriors par excellence, but their mindset was fundamentally different to those gene-born into the Legions. They had been created for a different task, one that they were perfectly adapted to, and one that required a certain level of individualism and self-reliance that was at odds with the gene-ingrained pack mentality of the Space Marines.

It would be an interesting thing, to pit the Legio Custodes against the Legiones Astartes. One on one, he suspected that the gold-armoured Custodians would have the edge, but the larger the battle got, the more he felt that his fellow legionaries would dominate.

The Legio Custodes were not soldiers, but Sor Talgron was a soldier to the core.

They halted before a third set of reinforced blast doors, flanked by slaved sentry cannons. Scans, identity confirmations, gene-key sequencing. Security was tighter than it had been when last Sor Talgron had walked the palace halls, back when his presence had felt far more welcome.

The occluded portals snapped open. A Custodian officer stood beyond, resplendent in his gold plate. Sor Talgron's gaze flicked left and right. Had he been wearing his helmet, threat glyphs would have been blinking before his eyes. The officer was accompanied by a squad of yellow-armoured Space Marines, bolters held across their chests.

That was unexpected, but he let no hint of surprise cross his face.

The visor of the officer slid back in a series of smoothly overlapping plates, revealing a face that Sor Talgron knew. It was hawkish and strong; unscarred, but Sor Talgron knew that meant nothing, not amongst the Legio Custodes. Had he been of the Legions, Sor Talgron would know that the warrior was either untested, or unfathomably good – the Custodians, however, were not built for a life of constant warfare on the front lines. That did not mean they lacked battle hardening. Far from it. Only a fool would underestimate them.

A ridge of short-cropped hair extended down the centre of the officer's shaved head, a crest that mirrored Sor Talgron's helmet. Whether it denoted rank or was merely an aesthetic choice, Sor Talgron did not know. Their kind had a strong, individualistic streak bred into them, so the latter was highly probable. Nevertheless, he found it somewhat ironic that this choice aped the appearance of the Captain-General, Constantin Valdor. So much for individualism.

‘I apologise for the manner of your reception,’ said the officer. His courtly accent was still strange to Sor Talgron’s ear, accustomed as he was to the more guttural Colchisian speech. ‘The universe has changed since you last stood on Terra.’

His name was Tiber Acanthus, and Sor Talgron had spent time in his company on his previous visits to Terra. The sentinel had never offered his other one hundred and thirty-seven names, nor did Sor Talgron have any desire to know them.

They greeted each other as warriors, wrist to wrist, clasping each other’s forearm. It was rare for the Word Bearer to look up at anyone, but the Custodian stood half a head taller than Sor Talgron.

‘What’s happened?’ he said as they broke apart. ‘It looks as though Terra is preparing for a siege.’

‘War is coming,’ said Acanthus.

Sor Talgron frowned. ‘War is nothing unusual,’ he said. ‘We’ve been fighting wars since the start of the Great Crusade. It is what we were made for.’

‘This war will be different.’

‘Why? Whatever new enemy the Crusade has uncovered, there is surely no threat to Terra itself,’ said Sor Talgron.

Tiber Acanthus did not answer, and Sor Talgron’s expression darkened.

‘Tell me,’ he said, his voice grim.

‘It is not my place,’ said the Custodian. ‘But I will take you to one who will. Come. Lord Dorn is expecting you.’

Five warriors watched as their brothers fought and died on the plains below. From their vantage, the battle was not unlike one of the simulation tables within the collegia, though here the death was very real. They stood in silence, each Ultramarine lost in his own prison of anger, remorse, defiance and grief.

They were not a tightly bonded unit, these five. They had not forged bonds of steel in the crucible of war. None of them had spoken before they had been brought together for this final task, this mission that could exonerate them and clean the slate of their past misdeeds.

They came from different companies, different squads, different backgrounds. One was a Sky Hunter, and one was drawn from the Assault ranks. Two had been drawn from Tactical units, though one of those had once wielded *other* powers before that path was closed to him, and now he was no different from any other ranked legionary. The last of their number was a disgraced hero of the

past.

Their skills and expertise were as disparate as their service records. It was only their shame that unified them.

Each of them wore a helmet painted red. Each of them bore the mark of censure.

They had all stood before their Chapter Master when they were briefed for this duty. None of them wanted it, but none of them had refused it. This was a way for them to clear their names, he had said. An honour.

It did not feel like an honour to Octavion. To him, it felt like the cruellest of punishments. Even so, he did not complain, and he did not begrudge Chapter Master Aecus Decimus for giving him this task. It had to fall to someone, and it might as well be those that had disgraced themselves in the eyes of their commanders.

He could feel the conflicted emotions of those around him as they watched the enemy forces encircling the Ultramarines on the plains far below. Every one of them wanted to be down there, doing their part, fighting – and dying – with the brothers they had trained and fought alongside for so long.

'There,' said one of their number, the Sky Hunter Paulus. He need not have bothered. They all saw it. Perhaps he needed to speak it aloud, Octavion thought. Perhaps in doing so, it was made real, more *practical*.

To the north, a dust cloud announced the approach of another Word Bearers division. They were coming from the city of Massilea, that once-proud city that was the heart and soul of this world.

Octavion had heard word that it had fallen earlier in the day. For all he knew, all of his battle-brothers were dead. Octavion's 174th Company had held that city longer than expected, inflicting a heavy toll on the traitors, but now it was gone.

He regarded Massilea as much a home as anywhere in the galaxy. It had been there that he had received the majority of his training, what seemed like an age ago.

'And there,' said Paulus, gesturing to the south.

Dark shapes were moving on the horizon: Thunderhawks, Stormbirds and attack craft. Another battle force moving in. They wanted to end this war quickly, Octavion saw. They did not want to be here any longer than necessary.

'It's time,' he said, voicing the truth that he knew was in all of their minds, hanging over them like a guillotine.

'Reinforcements from Ultramar could be inbound,' said the youngest of their number, Sio, only recently elevated from the Scout ranks. 'Could we not wait a

little longer?'

Octavion was not aware what infraction had seen Sio forced to wear the red. None of them volunteered explanations for their own censure and none of them asked it of the others. It was not something that any of them were comfortable discussing.

'That no reinforcements have arrived tells us that this is no isolated incident. War has engulfed Ultramar's Five Hundred,' said the brooding veteran Romus. 'We have our orders.' His voice was empty. Hollow. He was already resigned to die, Octavion realised.

'And what if those orders are wrong?' asked Sio.

'It does not matter,' growled Romus. 'Our names are already tarnished. I will not even consider compounding my dishonour by disobeying the final directive of our Chapter Master.'

There were murmurs of agreement from the others, but Octavion could feel the distress of the youngest battle-brother. It was coming off him in waves. It was there in them all, of course – none of them wanted this hateful, thankless task. The others were just better at repressing it.

'No one is coming,' said Octavion, his voice little more than a whisper.

'How can you be sure?' said Sio.

What could he say to soothe the young warrior's despair? Nothing. Besides, he had his own doubts to overcome. His own daemons.

'No one is coming,' boomed the fifth of their number, the massive once-champion, Korolos. That ended the matter.

'Let us go,' said Octavion, turning away from the battlefield, away from his dying Chapter and towards the waiting shuttle. A score of Imperial Army veterans waited there, standing to attention. Did they realise they were as doomed as the rest of them?

It wasn't just Sio that had hoped, if not believed, that they would not be required to enact the duty they had been tasked with.

Now they all were faced with the fact that even that slender hope was gone. It was not to be.

Now, indeed, they faced the death of hope itself.

Sor Talgron is summoned before Rogal Dorn

THREE

Sor Talgron found it wryly amusing that the Emperor's decree had neutered the Imperium's most potent weapon against the warp, at a time when it most needed it. He had no love of psykers, believing that it would be in humanity's best interests to eradicate them all, but he was a deeply pragmatic soul, and the Librarians were a weapon that the XVII Legion sorely needed. Having seen the powers that were being unleashed against his armies and worlds by the Warmaster's allies, if the Emperor did not overturn his idiocy soon then he was a prideful fool indeed.

The city was spread before him like a map rendered in three dimensions. Thick black smoke obscured entire sectors. The librarium was built upon a rocky outcrop in the northern sector of Massilea, the highest point in a broad valley delta. It had been a site of pilgrimage long before the Ultramarines had made it a centre of training for those within its ranks exhibiting psychic talents.

It had been a rich and populous centre, Massilea – built of marble, gold and glass – before it had been bombarded into ruin. Broken colonnades and fragments of statues lined broad streets that had become battlegrounds, littered with rubble, burned out shells of vehicles and the innumerable dead. A few triumphal arches remained, flying frayed and burned pennants, towering over parade grounds and squares turned to graveyards. Trees and green spaces had been integrated into the city's design, though they were now blackened tracts of scorched earth. Two bridges crossing the river which wended through the city

remained intact, the water below choked with corpses.

Thunderhawks and Stormbirds bearing the new Legion colours screamed overhead, churning the smoke and ash hanging over the city.

From his vantage, Sor Talgron could see the armoured elements of his assigned battalions moving through the secured sectors of the city. Rhinos, Land Raiders and Vindicators traversed the rubble-strewn streets, leading the way out of the city before the heavier assets grinding along in their wake – the Fellblades and Typhons that had been so instrumental in the earlier action.

The crackle of gunfire and the deeper thuds of shells and mortars still echoed out sporadically. Several of the eastern quadrants of the city were still not completely pacified. The fighting was brutal and taxing, as each building needed to be cleared floor by floor.

Booms like thunder rolling in from the west could be heard when the sound of localised artillery and gunfire abated. A battle was still under way out there on the plains beyond the valley, fifty kilometres away. He had already directed half his force to head there, to outflank the enemy assault. That battle would see the last real strength of the Ultramarines on this world shattered. That battle would be the last of it. Once it was done, the process of extraction would begin. All resistance within the system would be spent, and the final cull of the defiant human populations would be enacted. If any XIII Legion support ever arrived, they would find the entire system reduced to a graveyard.

The crackling reports of his officers came through on Dal Ahk's nuncio-vox. All was proceeding as expected.

There was a flash on the periphery of Sor Talgron's vision. He reacted instantly, shouting a warning and dropping into cover. Too slow.

Hot blood spurted across his faceplate. Chunks of it dripped down his visor. Ahraneth was down, his brains blown out through a gaping fist-sized hole in the left side of his helmet. The company banner was on the ground.

Sor Talgron seethed as he crouched with his back planted squarely against the marble balustrade. He stared at his dead standard bearer, at the blood soaking the banner. Dal Ahk was in cover beside him, relaying orders and the coordinates of the sniper's location. There was anger in his voice.

The area had been declared clear. Sor Talgron said nothing, letting his officers deal with it. He heard the clipped orders as legionaries closed in on the sniper's location. He heard the squad sergeant take responsibility for the mistake. There would be repercussions.

They sat there, listening to the vox reports of various elements of the Chapter

spread across the city, waiting for confirmation that the sniper had been neutralised. The pool of blood from Ahraneth's head was getting ever closer.

He found himself thinking of his old mentor, Volkhar Wreth. The thought was not a comforting one.

'He was a good warrior,' said Dal Ahk.

'What?' said Sor Talgron.

'Ahraneth,' said the master of signal, nodding towards the corpse sprawled before them. 'He was a good warrior. I saw him rip a greenskin's head clear off once, and he claimed a kill tally of seventeen eldar at Hallanax. He will be missed. His soul is one with the empyrean now.'

Sor Talgron grunted. 'You sound like a priest.'

'The teachings of–' Dal Ahk began, before he was interrupted by the tell-tale click of incoming vox-traffic.

'What is it?' Sor Talgron demanded.

'Third echelon,' reported Dal Ahk. 'They have identified the location of… wait… repeat. Is that confirmed?'

In the distance behind them they heard the sharp crack of grenade detonations, followed by the bark of bolter fire in several controlled bursts. Two hundred and thirty metres off, Sor Talgron estimated from the sound. The sniper was gone.

'Captain, third echelon have sighted Ultramarines docking at a concealed location, suspected communications outpost,' said Dal Ahk.

'Where?'

'Three hundred kilometres to the west. Shall I have the location targeted from orbit?'

'No,' said Sor Talgron. 'Send for my drop-ship.'

'Captain?'

'The enemy have conducted the defence of this world with considerable acumen and tenacity. I will not have the last of them obliterated from orbit. They will die as they lived – with honour.'

'Would they afford us the same respect if our situations were reversed, captain?' said Del Ahk. 'Why does it matter how they die?'

Sor Talgron thought of his old mentor again, and the fate that had befallen him.

'It matters to me,' he said.

The giant leaned on the table with massive bronze-encased fists.

He was immense. All of the primarchs were, but Sor Talgron had only ever stood in close proximity to one – Aurelian, the gene-father of the Word Bearers.

Rogal Dorn was much bigger.

Had it not been a secular age, the primarch of the Imperial Fists would surely have been worshipped as a demigod. No mortal could stand in his presence and not be cowed.

His face was as unforgiving as stone. His hair was snow-white and cropped short. His eyes were as hard and cold as diamonds and exuded a fierce, cold intelligence.

And anger. A deep, unforgiving abyss of anger that was palpable in his every movement and expression.

The table before him was huge, carved from the dark wood of a tree long extinct on Terra. It was covered with plans, communiques, orbital scans and data-slates. The wealth of information was overwhelming, yet there was order to it – nothing was out of place or unnecessary.

The chamber itself was cavernous, austere and sparsely furnished. There were no seats. One side of its length was dominated by floor to ceiling arched windows. From the view it was clear that the room was positioned high upon the Himalazian flanks, above the cloud line, and while the sky outside was black and pinpricked with stars, harsh industrial light from below flooded through those thick reinforced panes.

A meeting had been under way when Tiber Acanthus announced him. Bureaucrats, politicians, guilders, Administratum – Dorn dismissed them with a word. Few of them deigned even to look upon Sor Talgron as they filed out. These were the architects of the new Imperium. These were those with true power, and Sor Talgron loathed them. They had no concept of the blood, death and horrors that those that had carved out the Imperium had known. None of them had ever likely stepped off-world at all. One, elongated and skeletally thin and clutching construction plans and data-slates, had looked down at him, his pinched face disdainful. Sor Talgron had stared at him as he left, hating him and all his weak-blooded kind. These were the ones that they had been fighting for? It made him sick.

Tiber Acanthus had departed, pulling the huge wooden doors closed behind him. Two individuals remained with Dorn. Neither were introduced.

One he knew from the time he had spent on Terra – Archamus, master of Dorn's huscarl retinue. A stern, proud individual, his gene-heritage was clear; his features were strongly reminiscent of his primarch's.

The other was no Imperial Fist. His armour was plainly coloured and trimmed with a worn olive green. An officer of the Death Guard.

He was completely bald, this captain, and a stylised eagle taking flight bedecked his cuirass and gorget. His eyes were stern and unflinching. He looked solid, in Sor Talgron's estimation. Dependable. Stoic. Who he was, Sor Talgron did not know, but he instinctively liked him. This was a soldier he could respect.

The mystery of this warrior's identity had been forgotten as soon as Dorn began to speak. Now that he was done, the silence was heavy.

For a long moment, Sor Talgron stared at the Death Guard captain, his brow furrowed. Then his gaze returned to Dorn.

'It is…' he said, at last. 'It is difficult to comprehend.'

'Believe it,' said Rogal Dorn, his voice like rolling thunder.

'Isstvan Three will be forever damned in the annals of history,' added Archamus. Sor Talgron narrowed his eyes at him – there was too much pride in the huscarl's bearing.

'Four Legions turning against their own. Turning against the Emperor,' said Sor Talgron, shaking his head. 'It is madness.'

'Madness, aye,' said Dorn. 'Madness of the worst kind.'

The primarch pushed off the table, fists clenched. It looked like he wanted to hit something. If he put the full force of his fury behind it, Sor Talgron doubted any living being would have survived such a blow.

The giant moved across the chamber, his advance implacable, each step echoing heavily and accompanied by the mechanical hum and grind of his armour. He halted before the windows, staring down the range's flank. A multitude of floodlights bathed the mountainside, throwing the vast construction work below into stark relief. The harsh white glow underlit his features, emphasising the deep lines and contours of his face. He could have been carved from granite, so hard and immobile was he.

He remained there, staring out into the distance for a time. The silence was oppressive. Both Archamus and the unidentified Death Guard captain stared at Sor Talgron, unblinking.

'How did you learn of this atrocity?' said Sor Talgron finally, breaking the silence. 'My augurs and astropaths have heard nothing from beyond the borders of the segmentum for months, blinded by warp storms.'

The primarch turned and stalked back towards the heavy dark wood table, his expression grim. It took considerable force of will for Sor Talgron not to back away a step at his approach. It would be a terrifying vision to see in battle, this giant encased in gold coming at you with the intent to kill.

'The astropathic choir has been silent,' growled Dorn. 'We have heard nothing

from the Isstvan System since the start of this.'

Sor Talgron frowned, but said nothing.

'Rather, I heard it from one who was there,' said Dorn, answering his unspoken question.

Dorn inclined his head, and Sor Talgron's gaze was drawn to the Death Guard captain standing silently to attention.

'This is Battle-Captain Nathaniel Garro, formerly of the Fourteenth Legion,' said the primarch.

Garro saluted, striking his chest with his fist in the old Terran tradition. Sor Talgron returned the gesture.

'It surprises me to see one of the Death Guard standing here, having just heard the tale of your Legion's betrayal,' he said.

'It is no tale,' snapped Archamus. 'It is the truth.'

Sor Talgron glanced at him. 'A figure of speech,' he said, before returning his attention to Garro.

'It saddens me to stand here and speak of such events,' said the Death Guard captain. 'My ties to my Legion died along with my true brothers, who were butchered on Isstvan Three for the crime of their loyalty.'

'You are a legionary without a Legion, then.'

'So it would seem.'

'Garro was witness to the Warmaster's betrayal. He saw my… brother*,' said Dorn, almost spitting the word, 'turn against the Imperium. Horus attacked Isstvan Three with virus bombs, killing untold thousands of legionaries loyal to the Emperor, and millions of citizens. In the face of this atrocity, Garro took his ship – the* Eisenstein *– and fought his way clear to bring word to Terra.'*

'It seems that the Imperium owes you a debt of gratitude,' said Sor Talgron, bowing his head towards Garro.

'I merely did what I felt was my duty,' said Garro, a little stiffly.

'Had the Eisenstein *not broken through the blockade and brought word of the betrayal, we would not have known of this atrocity until it was too late,' said Archamus.*

'Throne,' said Sor Talgron. 'The Warmaster might have taken Terra virtually unchallenged.'

'He could have,' said Dorn. 'But his ploy failed.'

'The Legions killing their own, civil war, a plot to dethrone the Emperor?' said Sor Talgron with a shake of the head. 'How did it come to this?'

'Through the actions of one man – Horus Lupercal,' said Dorn. 'Horus was the

best of us. If he could fall, anyone could fall. Which brings me to you and your battle-brothers, captain.'

FOUR

Sor Talgron hated the zealotry. He hated the metaphysical *need* that seemed gene-coded into his battle-brothers – there was a new and desperate hunger in the Legion to believe in something more than the struggle and pain and torment that was mortal existence. But that was what life was, one bloody task after another until death finally came to claim you. Why did there need to be anything more to it than that?

Why this insatiable need for meaning? For *faith*?

It was a weakness, he believed. A failing. Something the Legion had inherited from Lorgar Aurelian, and Sor Talgron almost hated his primarch for that. He was awed by him, and would not hesitate to sacrifice his life for him, of course, but he almost hated him nonetheless. He did not know why he did not have the same ingrained compulsion as his brothers. Perhaps the failing was *his*?

If he had spoken of this to anyone, even his subordinates, they would not understand. They would have despised him. No doubt an athame would have come for him soon after. Just another purge.

He had felt something like a kinship with the Custodian sentinel Tiber Acanthus, more perhaps than he had with his closest battle-brothers, and that relationship had been built upon lies. What did that make him?

The Stormbird rose from below and hovered before him, powerful down-thrusters screaming and blowing up dust. It rotated, its assault ramp lowering. He held the Legion standard now, and the heavy, blood-soaked cloth whipped

like a sail before the assault craft's jets. He stepped up onto the terrace's marble balustrade and into the assault craft's interior, ignoring the forty-metre drop that would have claimed him had the pilots been unable to hold it steady. Dal Ahk and two squads of legionaries stepped over the gap behind him, boots mag-locking onto the assault ramp with barely conscious thought impulses.

Some legionaries hated those moments of being packed into a Stormbird, or a drop pod or Caestus ram, being hurtled into the thick of the fighting, relinquishing control over their fate to the pilots, the driver, or to pure luck. Sor Talgron was not one of them. If they were shot down or obliterated before they reached their target, then such was the way of it. That made him feel calm. If something were to happen, he had no control over it. Let what will happen, happen.

Today, however, he did not feel comfortable within the confines of the Stormbird. The walls seemed to close in upon him, like an oubliette.

He moved through the ship, past the banks of assault harnesses and weapons caches, moving into the cockpit. The two flight officers, sitting back to back, acknowledged his presence with restrained nods. The two pilot servitors seated to the front had drool hanging from their blue lips, like white gruel. Their pallid flesh twitched.

Beyond the cockpit, the city of Massilea was tinged grey-green by the lighting and tinted filters of the curved armourglass shell. Hologrammatic overlays were projected before the lead pilot, delivering the flight officers a wealth of data, while detailed topographical maps rendered in three dimensions hovered before the co-pilot. The green lines of the overlays looked warped and strange from Sor Talgron's angle. Additional information would be there too, he knew, visible to the flight officers alone. He braced himself, holding on to overhead railings.

To aft, the assault ramp sealed and the Stormbird lifted, banking sharply towards the west, wing tips pointing towards the heavens and the ground as it turned. Sor Talgron remained rooted in place, mag-locks keeping his boots clamped to the deck. They swung over the librarium jutting up from the rock below, all flames, smoke and dirty white marble. Then they were hurtling over the city, the ruins whipping by below them.

They dropped altitude as they exited the city, pulling in low over the turquoise river, kicking up twin walls of spray in their wake. They ate up the kilometres, following the twisting cliffs lining the river.

They crossed deep azure waters as the river fed into a lake that could have been mistaken for a sea. From there they veered over the land, screaming over the

detritus of a battlefield recently won. The Legion was gone, moving from their war front to the nearest of the drop zones. The time to leave this world was nearing, and Sor Talgron had already given the word for unengaged elements of the 34th Company to head for the muster points, ready for extraction.

Burning pyres had been left in the Legion's wake, piled high with the dead, but what arrested Sor Talgron's attention were the immense armoured shells that lay scattered across the blackened earth. The field was a graveyard for loyalist Titans. Most had been taken down with little loss to XVII Legion forces – once the battle in the void above had been won, the Titans were easy prey for the fleet's orbital weaponry. Unsupported Titans were little more than walking death traps, and repeated lance strikes had ripped through the void shields of these enticing targets before smashing them to the ground. Only the Warhounds had been swift enough to evade the devastating salvoes, and from the reports that had come in they had carved a bloody toll through the invading ground forces before they too had finally been brought low.

The downed forms of half a dozen colossal mechanical giants swarmed with Mechanicum adepts and servitors. These were sects of the Martian priesthood that had thrown their lot in with the Legion and Horus' cause, and they picked over the Reaver, Warhound and Nemesis-class engines like maggots feeding upon rotting carcasses.

The Stormbird passed over a tract of strangely untouched wilderness, an island of green fir trees in an ocean of fire-blackened earth, and scattered a herd of multi-antlered quadrupeds below. Some life still flourished, it seemed, away from the main engagements.

They approached one of the Legion's muster zones. Bulk landers hung low and expectant overhead, readying to pick up the heavier ground elements. Already Word Bearers Rhinos and Land Raiders were snaking in through the rocky canyons for extraction. The Stormbird dipped its wings in salute to the warriors below, and Sor Talgron saw a lone tank commander, standing in the open cupola of a Proteus, raise a hand in return.

They continued on to the east, sweeping up blasted hills and over smoking outlying estates and an ancient forest that had been reduced to char and embers. They passed a trio of Deathdealer Night Gaunts striding back along a ridge of blasted scree towards the muster point and the waiting mass lifters. The Titans were hung with kill banners and pennants. More kills would be emblazoned upon them after they were secured aboard the ugly Mechanicum ships in orbit above; Legio Mordaxis had proved its worth on the battlefield once again. The

swiftly striding god-machines, hunched and beetle-backed though they were, each bore ordnance capable of laying waste to entire companies.

The lead Titan, its black carapace edged in yellow, swung its heavy head towards the Stormbird passing a hundred metres to its flank and let out a world-shuddering blast of its warhorn. A greeting? A challenge? Sor Talgron did not know. The other two war machines let out their own ululating, booming cries, and then they were past them, angling towards the ice-capped mountain range looming on the horizon, reminiscent of the towering peaks of the Imperial Palace on Terra. Sor Talgron forcibly pushed the comparison from his mind.

Initial surveys of the region had revealed no enemy presence, but that had clearly been incorrect. Some form of shielding still concealed the outpost, perhaps, for Dal Ahk had reported that fleet imaging and drone scans had come back with nothing. It refused to appear on any augury scan or sweep. They were going in blind.

They soared through the icy peaks, locked to the blinking beacon planted by the recon squads.

'I see it,' said the ranking flight officer. Sor Talgron leant forwards, squinting past the blinking red target-marker hovering in the air. He was unable to see anything until they were right in front of it, so well concealed was the structure from the air.

'By the blood of the Urizen,' said Sor Talgron. 'How did Loth find it?'

'I don't know, captain,' said the officer. 'Shuttles and gunships scoured this region and came up with nothing. Perhaps he got lucky.'

'He gets lucky a lot, then,' said Sor Talgron, knowing that luck had nothing to do with it. Loth was the best reconnaissance operative in the company, perhaps the whole Legion. He had proved himself time and time again, across a dozen campaigns and systems.

A landing pad had been built into the mountainside, tucked beneath a deep overhang. The Stormbird came in under the protruding stone shelf. A XVII Legion lander was already there, and legionaries stood awaiting his arrival. A shuttle in the blue of the XIII Legion was tucked further back.

Sor Talgron's vox clicked. Closed channel. Dal Ahk.

'Captain, why would the enemy come here?' asked Dal Ahk. *'Battle is still ongoing on several fronts. Ultramarines still live and breathe on this world. They have lost the war, and have no hope of extraction. Even if this is a communication hub, why come here? There is no fleet within the system to communicate* with*.'*

‘The enemy are nothing if not rational. There’s clearly a reason that we are not seeing,’ replied Sor Talgron. ‘I want to know what it is.’

Silence, then a click as Dal Ahk’s vox-link closed.

The master of signal was uneasy at Sor Talgron’s decision, he knew. He had not said as much, but it was obvious nonetheless. Sor Talgron understood. Coming here in person was unnecessary. More than this, it was out of character.

The Stormbird’s wings adjusted as the thrusters brought it in onto the landing pad. Taloned claws clacked as they were lowered down.

His unadorned, standard-issue Umbra pattern bolter was locked to his thigh, and the familiar weight of his flanged mace hung on his left hip. His newly acquired volkite pistol was holstered on his right side.

Cold mountain air rushed into the Stormbird as the assault ramp opened once more. Without a word, Sor Talgron turned and strode down the length of the gunship’s interior and out into the sun.

Sor Talgron’s expression hardened at Dorn’s words.

‘The loyalty of the Seventeenth has never been questioned,’ he said, not even attempting to keep the anger out of his voice. ‘We have been accused of being overzealous in our… adoration of the Emperor in the past, but never has anyone doubted our loyalty or our devotion to the Imperium.’

Archamus lifted a slate, scrolling through a swathe of data with a gesture.

‘You’ve been very active since your posting here,’ he said. ‘Patrolling the length and breadth of the Solar System, regulated inspections to Mars and the shipyards of Jupiter and Luna, maintaining a presence within the Imperial Pal–’

‘Such is my duty!’ said Sor Talgron, interrupting. His expression was thunderous. ‘If you have something you wish to accuse me of, then just come out and say it. Stop dancing around the issue.’

Archamus put the data-slate down on the table.

‘Where have you been these last two months?’ he said.

‘This is an interrogation now, my lord?’ said Sor Talgron, pointedly looking away from Archamus to address Rogal Dorn.

The primarch’s expression was unreadable, and he said nothing.

‘Not unless you have something you wish to conceal,’ said Archamus.

A dangerous stillness had settled over Rogal Dorn like a mantle. Sor Talgron felt his diamond-hard eyes boring into him.

‘Battle-Captain Garro,’ said the primarch, finally. ‘I know you have important matters to attend to. I thank you for your time. You may leave us.’

Garro slammed his fist into his chest once more, and bowed to Lord Dorn. Casting a last glance towards Sor Talgron, he walked from the room. The door clicked shut behind him. Rogal Dorn continued to stare at Sor Talgron.

'Where were you?' he said.

'I journeyed to the Shrine of Unity, as I am sure you are already aware,' Sor Talgron growled. He raised his eyebrows at Archamus. 'Satisfied?'

'The comet?' said the master of huscarls. 'For what purpose?'

Sor Talgron looked him squarely in the eyes. 'I went there to set things right,' he said.

'Explain,' said Dorn.

Sor Talgron's reluctance to do so was clear. The shrine was a potent symbol of Imperial strength and unified purpose. It had been carved into an immense comet that routinely swung back into the Solar System several times every thousand years, tracking an irregular elliptical route around the sun. In millennia past, when its trajectory was stable and more accurately predicted, it had worn a different name, but what it was had been lost in the murky fog of time. The comet had been seen in the heavens when the Emperor had won the Unification Wars on Terra, and it was for his victory that the shrine had been created.

Sor Talgron was unwilling to speak before outsiders, but Dorn's expression was unforgiving and demanded an answer.

'In the past the Seventeenth Legion has exhibited traits that were decreed to be… at odds with the secular nature of the Imperium,' said Sor Talgron.

He lowered his eyes as he recalled the rebuke that his Legion had suffered at Monarchia. The pain of it still festered within him, though he had never been a devout soul by any regards. That he did not want to speak these words aloud was plain, as plain as his anger at being forced to recount his Legion's shame.

'The Legion has seen the error of its ways,' he said.

'And the comet?'

'The comet's orbit will see it return through the Solar System in a matter of years. I was ordered to remove certain edifications that had been erected upon the comet before it did so.'

The primarch snorted. 'My little brother can be such a fool,' he said.

'Lorgar built a temple deifying the Emperor on the Shrine of Unity, didn't he?' said Archamus, catching up a moment later. 'Before Monarchia. You were there to tear it down, before anyone found out.'

Anger surged through Sor Talgron at the casual mention of his primarch's name

and the disdain in the Imperial Fist's tone, and it took all his will to hold it in check. Rogal Dorn still watched him, unblinking.

'As I said,' said Sor Talgron, meeting Dorn's gaze. 'The Seventeenth has since seen the error of its ways. Already we have been shamed before all the Legions. The Urizen did not wish any further embarrassment.'

Sor Talgron looked at Archamus.

'Satisfied? We are not traitors. I *am no traitor.'*

'None of us believed the Warmaster was capable of betrayal,' said Archamus.

Sor Talgron's hands clenched into fists, and he was about to speak, but Dorn held up his hand to silence him.

'Enough,' he said, an iron finality in his voice. 'And Archamus, you are wrong – Horus was always *capable of these actions. I've never met a man* more *capable, I just did not expect him to take this path. I thought even his arrogance had a limit, but it would seem I was mistaken.' His expression was uncompromising. Anger simmered just below the surface. 'I am not often mistaken.'*

Archamus was glaring at Sor Talgron, as if he was responsible for his rebuke.

'Lorgar is subtle,' said Dorn. 'He chose well in posting you here.'

'My lord?' said Sor Talgron.

'In order to assure the Emperor that his very public rebuke was understood, he sent you to Terra,' said Dorn. 'He chose well.'

'I was sent here to bolster the Legion presence…'

'But why you, of all his vaunted captains?'

'I do not know, my lord,' Sor Talgron replied. 'Perhaps Lord Aurelian was displeased with me.'

'It chafes you that you are not on the front lines, fighting with your brothers. I can understand that better than most,' said Dorn, bitterness tinging his words. 'But that is not why Lorgar sent you here. This is not a punishment.'

'Sometimes it feels like it, my lord,' said Sor Talgron.

'You are a different breed from the rest of the Seventeenth Legion. You are practical and pragmatic, where your brothers are overzealous. You are a soldier, with no pretences of being otherwise. Most of your bloodline speak like priests. It is distasteful. This is why Lorgar sent you here.'

'My lord, the Seventeenth was rebuked for venerating the Emperor too deeply,' said Sor Talgron. 'The Legion has changed.'

'Did you ever venerate the Emperor, captain?' said Dorn.

'My lord, I… Forgive me. I am not comfortable speaking of such things.'

'I do not believe that you did,' Dorn continued. 'Your faith is in strategy and

tactics, boots on the ground and armour upon your back. Your faith lies in bolters and blood, logistics and battlefield commands. Tell me I am wrong.'

Sor Talgron said nothing.

'In truth, I'm jealous that the Seventeenth got you,' said Dorn. 'You would have made a fine Imperial Fist.'

Sor Talgron was silent, unsure how to respond. 'Thank you, my lord,' he murmured at last.

'Indeed, you are the perfect captain for Lorgar to send to Terra to reassure the Emperor that all is well within the Seventeenth.'

'All is *well within the Seventeenth,' said Sor Talgron.*

'The question of your loyalty is not the reason I have brought you here, captain,' said Dorn. 'Let me clarify my position. There is no reason for me to regard the Seventeenth as anything but a Legion loyal to the Emperor. As you say – if anything, your Legion has proven itself perhaps too *loyal in the past. I do not believe you or your Legion are traitors. That is not the reason why I locked down your fleet in the Luna shipyards. It is not the reason I allowed you alone to cross the palace's threshold. It is not the reason why your warriors garrisoned here have been placed under guard.'*

'Why then?'

'I have to be seen to treat all the Legions the same. To do otherwise would be to risk accusations of favouritism and cause more rifts between my brothers. Your warriors are not the only ones within the Imperial Palace that I have imprisoned.'

Sor Talgron frowned. 'What others?'

'The Crusader Host,' replied Rogal Dorn, flexing his immense fingers.

'You've imprisoned them? All of them?'

'All of them,' said Dorn.

'Even those of Legions you know to be loyal?'

'Who can say how deep this rot goes?'

'The Legions will not like it,' said Sor Talgron, folding his arms across his chest. 'Some less than others.'

'I do not care,' said Dorn. 'I am trying to ensure the Imperium does not fall down around us. I will do anything to ensure that it does not. Anything*.'*

'You've imprisoned the Imperial Fists who stand as part of the Crusader Host, then?' said Sor Talgron.

'No. The Imperial Fists are no longer a crusading Legion, therefore our representatives within the Preceptory have been withdrawn. We have been

named the Emperor's praetorians. It is difficult to guard the palace if we are under lock and key.'

'I do not disagree, though that may be seen differently by others,' said Sor Talgron. 'It sounds like there is one rule for your Fists, and one for everyone else.'

'It is what it is,' said Dorn.

'And what of the Sixth Legion's watch-pack stationed with you?' asked Sor Talgron. 'What of those sons of Russ? You have imprisoned them as well, then?'

Dorn's face was stony. 'No. They operate under orders from the Sigillite. They are exempt.'

'Pardon my bluntness, my lord, but does that not reek of hypocrisy?'

'This is the way it must be.'

Sor Talgron looked away, gathering his thoughts. 'This is all just politics, isn't it?' he said.

'At a time when it has been proven that any Legion could turn against the Imperium, at least theoretically, I must be seen to be proactively ensuring Terra's security while also walking a fine line to keep the loyal Legions together,' said Dorn. 'Yes, this is a political decision.'

The primarch gave him a moment to let that sink in.

'You are angry,' he said, finally. 'I understand that. You return to Terra to find your legionaries imprisoned. Any leader would be angry.'

'As you say,' said Sor Talgron.

'In a perfect universe I would have no need to lock up loyal legionaries that could be of use garrisoning the palace should the worst possibility eventuate,' said Dorn. 'This is not a perfect universe.'

'So what happens next?' asked Sor Talgron.

'Your garrison will be released and transported back to your fleet. The locks on your ships will be lifted. You will join them in orbit, and then you will leave. By the time tomorrow dawns, there will be no member of the Word Bearers Legion within the Solar System. Your time here has come to an end.'

'My lord?'

'Seven other Legions will join my retribution fleet in mustering upon the Isstvan System,' said Dorn. 'You will be there too, and will take the fight to the Warmaster.'

The primogenitor of the Imperial Fists was not known to be as unpredictable as some of his brothers, but he was undoubtedly one of the most powerful beings in creation, and Sor Talgron was not familiar with his disposition and humours. He

chose his words carefully.

'With respect, my lord, my orders were to maintain a Seventeenth Legion presence in the Solar System,' said Sor Talgron. 'They came from Lord Aurelian himself. I cannot disobey his command.'

'Consider Lorgar's orders overruled,' said Dorn. 'This is an honour, captain. You will be a part of the battle that will set things right.'

'No, it is merely politically convenient to send me away,' Sor Talgron countered. 'If I take the Thirty-Fourth to join the muster, will that not leave Terra more vulnerable?'

'The Imperial Fists have been named as the Emperor's praetorians,' said Archamus. 'It is our duty to protect Terra.'

'An invasion fleet could be on its way here now,' said Sor Talgron. 'If that is the case, you will have need of my legionaries.'

'Our duty, not yours,' Archamus repeated. Sor Talgron met the Imperial Fist's glare with one of his own.

'You would let your own pride put Terra in jeopardy?' he said.

Archamus' blade was half out of its scabbard when Dorn slammed his fist down into the centre of the table. He pulled the blow; if he hadn't, the table would have been nothing but splinters scattered across the length of the chamber.

'Enough,' he said. He did not raise his voice; he did not have to. Archamus sheathed his sword, though his face remained murderous.

'This will end where it began,' said Dorn. 'At Isstvan.'

'If I was a traitor, you'd be sending me into the hands of your enemy, unharmed,' said Sor Talgron.

'I have enough legionaries incarcerated here as it is.'

'With all respect, my lord, I believe this is a mistake.'

'Your protestations are noted, captain,' said Rogal Dorn. 'Noted, and ignored. You are leaving Terra. But there is one last matter for us to discuss – the Seventeenth's representative within the Crusader Host.'

'Volkhar Wreth,' said Sor Talgron. 'Surely you cannot doubt where his loyalties lie?'

'No, he is perhaps the only other member of the Crusader Host that I do not *doubt. It is one of the reasons why I am releasing him into your custody. One more loyal legionary to join the muster.'*

'And one less to guard here within the walls of the palace,' said Sor Talgron. 'One less potential enemy within.'

'That too,' said Dorn, steepling his fingers before him.

‘He will be appreciative, my lord,’ said Sor Talgron, bowing his head. ‘A legionary should face his fate on the battlefield, not linger in a prison cell.’

The primarch nodded. ‘He will be isolated from the others. They cannot know that he is being released. I will arrange for him to be transferred to a different holding location. Less security. You’ll be granted clearance. Would that I could be rid of them all as easily.’

FIVE

‘The shaft goes deep into the heart of the mountain,’ said Reconnaissance Sergeant Loth. He spat on the landing pad deck. The acidic transhuman saliva sizzled as it ate into the metalwork. ‘Three hundred metres, straight down.’

Loth had taken off his helm, augmented with non-standard sensor arrays and targeters, to give his report to Sor Talgron. One of his eyes had been replaced with a bionic, the lens whirring faintly as it focused. His one remaining organic eye was cold and utterly soulless. The captain noted the twelve-toothed cog symbol branded into his forehead, marking him as having received training on Mars.

Such a mark was highly unusual outside of techmarine covenants. He had been groomed for that path, but had neither the temperament nor the inclination to succeed upon it. He had been reassigned to the recon ranks, where his fierce independence, resourcefulness and insubordination were a more comfortable fit. Those same traits that had made him such a bad line soldier proved to be an asset, and his Martian training made him invaluable when working behind enemy lines as a saboteur.

Indeed, that talent had been well used on Terra.

He cradled a long rifle wrapped in camo-netting in the crook of one arm. A ragged cameleoline shadowcloak hung over his stripped down armour, the heavy material bending light around him. Beneath the dust and mud, that armour retained the slate grey of the Legion’s original colours.

He had cursed, using low-caste Colchisian gutter-slang, when Dark Apostle Jarulek had questioned his choice not to consecrate his armour in the colours of the Legion reborn.

'You try remaining unseen garbed in red, priest,' he had snarled. Jarulek had sought Sor Talgron, requesting that the captain overrule the insubordinate recon sergeant. But he had not disagreed with Loth's reasoning, and had let the protest stand.

It had been Loth and his understrength squad that had spied the stealth-shrouded enemy craft flying low through the valleys of the mountains. They had been returning from a scouting kill-mission, and while the enemy craft had not appeared on the squad's signum, they had locked onto its heat signature and tracked it as it came in to land. It had been Loth's locator beacon that had guided Sor Talgron's ship here.

The XVII Legion warriors were working to gain entry to the shaft via the sealed, heavy reinforced blast portal that appeared to be the only entrance. Las-cutters spat and whined as they worked.

'There's a conveyor, currently at the base of the shaft,' said Loth. 'It's been deactivated, and will be rigged if they have any sense. It's what I'd do.'

'Can you bring it back online?' said Sor Talgron.

'It shouldn't be difficult.'

'Good,' said Sor Talgron. 'Once that door is free, I want you and your squad down that shaft. Bring the conveyor up. Try not to get yourselves blown up.'

Loth nodded vaguely and moved to brief his squad, spitting again as he walked away.

'Low-caste dog,' said Dal Ahk, watching Loth squat and begin outlining his orders to the group crouched around him.

'I was low-caste as well, remember,' growled Sor Talgron.

'I'm sorry, my lord. I spoke out of turn.'

'Put your prejudice aside. If he wasn't any good, he'd be dead by now.'

'They'll be waiting for us down there. We'll be walking straight into their guns.'

'I am aware of that,' said Sor Talgron.

'I don't understand, captain. Why are we bothering with them? The war is won. The world is taken.'

'I do not intend to leave this sector while a single Ultramarine still breathes within it,' said Sor Talgron. 'We could pound this mountain for weeks from orbit and they'd still be down there. They'd barely even notice. Are we walking into

an ambush? Yes. Is there any alternative? No.'

'Why retreat here?'

'Ah, now that is the better question.'

'And the answer?'

Sor Talgron turned to look at his master of signal. 'I have no idea,' he said.

'Pistols and blades,' Loth announced, standing. His legionaries unburdened themselves of extraneous encumbrance: ammunition, power-packs, communications equipment and their bulkier weapons. They stripped off their refractive shadowcloaks. Lastly, Loth leaned his long rifle amidst the pile of gear, parting with it only reluctantly.

'Nobody touch that,' he snarled before slipping on his modified helm. His lenses did not light up – they were non-reflective and muted, as flat and dead as his single organic eye.

The doors were cracked, and the secure portals were wrenched open. Loth directed a lazy salute at Sor Talgron and Dal Ahk before turning and leading his squad on the descent. One by one, they slipped over the lip of the conveyor shaft, as soundless as shadows.

'Insubordinate bastard,' said Dal Ahk after he had gone, moving amongst the stacked gear and pointedly kicking over Loth's rifle. Sor Talgron shook his head.

While they waited, another shuttle arrived, brought in at Sor Talgron's order. A heavily armoured siege squad disembarked, clomping onto the landing pad. They were wore Mark III Iron armour, heavily modified for frontal assaults, and each carried a bulky siege shield. They were amongst the most battle-hardened legionaries within the Chapter, often forming the vanguard against fortifications and enemy ships, and while the rate of attrition within their ranks was notoriously high, that was also a mark of honour amongst them. These tough veterans were some of Sor Talgron's premier line-breakers.

'At your command,' said Telakhas, the squad's sergeant. A massive thunder hammer was mag-locked across his back.

The Dark Apostle Jarulek also accompanied the breacher squad. The legionaries bowed their heads as he walked through their ranks, offering him a level of deference that Sor Talgron found distasteful.

Still, he could not dispute the effect the preacher's presence had on his men. Their resolve was visibly bolstered wherever he fought in the battle line, and there had been more than one engagement where the success of the 34th had hinged on his ability to inspire a fanatical zealotry among the legionaries. Sor Talgron mistrusted the way he manipulated the emotions of those who followed

him, but he was not fool enough to be blind to the fact the priest served a purpose, and served it well.

Perhaps what rankled most was that while Jarulek would never have the strategic acumen that Sor Talgron commanded, he instinctively knew how to get the best out of the men on the ground – better than Sor Talgron himself. The priest knew the power of well-chosen words, and when his fiery rhetoric should be punctuated with action. He *inspired* them. Sor Talgron was deeply respected by all, but he was not one for speeches or fancy words. He was built for direct action, and while he had a deep-seated aversion to the power of anything as ephemeral as mere words, he knew that this was more of a weakness on his part than a reflection of their lack of worth.

Not that Jarulek was a poor soldier – the opposite, in fact. If he had not been claimed early in his tenure, plucked from the ranks of neophytes and chosen for a Chaplain's ministry, Sor Talgron would have had him commanding a battalion of his own by now. His instincts were good, and they had been further honed in the time that he had spent seconded to Kor Phaeron, acting as one of his war consuls.

Jarulek knew of his misgivings.

'You do not require the rhetoric of faith in order to fight your best,' Jarulek had said to him on the fields of Nalahsa. That day the Dark Apostle had led a savage counter-attack against the greenskins, driving a wedge into the heart of the enemy formations to slay their warlord. That action had won them that war. Both of them had been covered in sticky, foul-smelling greenskin gore. *'That is not your way – and meaning no disrespect, my lord, it is both a strength and weakness. But these warriors*,' he had said, gesturing to the victorious legionaries around them, *'they do not have your… singularity of focus. Your resolve. Your pragmatism. They need something more. They need faith and guidance. They fight all the better for it, and without it they would be lost.'*

It grated on Sor Talgron that he knew the preacher was right.

He inclined his head to Jarulek now as the preacher made his rounds, stopping to speak in quiet tones to individual warriors, laying a hand upon the shoulder of others. Jarulek bowed to him, lowering his eyes in deference. Sor Talgron turned away.

He commandeered a boarding shield from the newcomers' weapon cache. It was heavy, with an inbuilt refractor field, and it covered a legionary from head to knee. Its surface was black, and it bore evidence of las-scoring and plasma-burns. There were other, newer shields that he could have chosen, but he had an

aversion to weapons that had not yet been tempered in battle.

Dal Ahk had remarked, once, that it was just superstition. And he knew that the captain hated anything as pointless as superstition.

Sor Talgron had not deigned to reply. *'You really are a humourless bastard, you know,'* Dal Ahk had said. *That* had got a smile out of him.

There was no hint of levity in the master of signal now, though. He could practically see the scowl on his face for all that he was wearing his battle helm.

'You are going in yourself, then?' said Dal Ahk. Any belligerence or disapproval in his tone was rendered indiscernible by his helm's augmitters. *Everything* was transformed into an angry growl by Legion helms, such that all subtlety in tone and intonation was lost. It was perhaps one of the reasons why Space Marines were so poor at reading irony and sarcasm in unaugmented humans, he thought.

'I am,' said Sor Talgron. 'You are not.' The master of signal said nothing. He didn't need to. 'I need you up here. Keep the communication lines open.'

Dal Ahk saluted and walked away without a word. His disapproval radiated off him like a heat haze.

Sor Talgron locked the boarding shield to his left arm. He felt the humming vibration as the refractor field powered up.

He moved to the edge of the landing platform. In the far distance, the bulk landers hung like vast swollen insects. He stood alone.

'You are a different breed from the rest of the Seventeenth Legion. You are practical and pragmatic, where your bothers are overzealous.'

Dorn's words grated on him. Maybe he *had* been the right choice to act as the enemy within, but he had loathed every moment of it. He had hated the deception, stealth and falseness that had been demanded of him, and he hated himself for having performed that role so well. He had despised it, but a soldier follows orders. Perhaps Lorgar *had* chosen well.

There were others within the Legion that hungered for power and would have revelled in the betrayal – Erebus for one. Few saw him for the conniving manipulator that he was. That said, Dorn wouldn't have been taken in by him, of that he was sure.

Sor Talgron had always been surprised that others did not see through the poisonous First Chaplain. He had too much influence over the Legion, and his corruption was contagious. Sor Talgron prayed that the snake would not survive Calth.

Prayed. A poor choice of words on his part. He had never prayed a day in his

life, not even as a child on Colchis. He was not planning on starting now.

He had seen the same cancer that festered in Erebus within some members of the Chapter. It was not to the same degree as in the other chapters of the Legion, but it was there, much to his chagrin. It was worse among the newer recruits – those more recently indoctrinated into the XVII Legion seemed more corruptible, more drawn to immersing themselves in the new faith and the lust for power. It did not bode well for the future and he had grave concerns for the Legion. Would it even be recognisable in a decade, or a hundred years hence?

He had done what he could to keep the ranks of the 34th as clean as possible – those he'd judged most inclined to fall to Erebus' corrupting influence had been sent on to Calth. He would not be displeased if none of them came back. It was another purge of the Legion's ranks, in a sense. Not of the scale of the one that had come before, but an important one nonetheless. He did not care if martyrs were made. Cut out the corruption and the whole may be diminished, but the Legion would be the stronger for it in the long run.

He was not normally one to dwell on introspection – at least he had not been before Forty-Seven Sixteen – and he had a task at hand. Less than fifteen minutes had passed when word came from the scouts.

'Four explosive devices disengaged, and the beacon is set,' came Loth's cold whisper in Sor Talgron's ear, breaking his self-imposed vox-silence. *'Power has been restored to the conveyor. On the way topside.'*

Moments later, the grinding of mechanical gears announced the carriage beginning its ascent.

'There are enemies back down there,' added Loth. *'Legionaries and Imperial Army.*'

'Numbers?'

'*Difficult to say, our scanners were being blocked. Not many, but dug in and waiting*.'

'Master of Signal,' said Sor Talgron, cutting off his vox-link. 'Does the fleet have a lock on the beacon?'

'They do, captain,' said Dal Ahk. 'They are calibrating now.'

'How long?'

'They will be ready to sequence in seven minutes.'

'What are your orders, my lord?' asked Jarulek, joining them. 'How are you going to play this?'

'We go down there. We kill everything we find,' he said.

'Good plan,' said Jarulek, with a smile. That smile never touched his eyes, Sor

Talgron noted. In his eyes lurked only darkness.

SIX

Korolos knew that true death was coming down the conveyor shaft, and he welcomed it like a friend he thought had long abandoned him.

There was nothing to be feared in death; only failure in life was to be feared. This he had learnt by bitter experience.

Once, his helm had borne the transverse centurion crest of an officer, but no more. He had been marked for greatness, serving first as the champion of the 178th Company, then rising through the officer ranks. Pride had been his downfall. Now, his helm was red with the mark of censure, the mark of his shame. He had woken after Senosia IV to find it had been removed, a cobalt-blue helm fixed in its place, but he had been insistent.

'Your time of penance is passed, old friend,' Chapter Master Levianus had said – this was before young Aecus Decimus had risen to the post. *'You carried that burden long enough. Too long. That fault is mine, and for that I am sorry. You've suffered enough.'*

He would have none of it. His honour was forever stained, he said – he could not let it go. The red helm ensured that his dishonour was externalised, plain for all to see, and he would not hear of putting it aside while he still felt the burning shame that ate away at him. That could only be achieved in death.

In the end, they had relented.

He had yearned for this release for more than a century. He could never right the wrongs that he had wrought – he could never bring back the lives of battle-

brothers lost through his arrogance and hubris – but perhaps in death he could go some way towards atoning for those mistakes.

All his friends and comrades were dead. All those proud Ultramarians that he had trained with in the academies of Armatura. All those who had been at his side as the Great Crusade pushed out beyond the edges of the map, expanding the domain of the Imperium. All his closest brothers, those he had laughed with, bled with and killed with, all of them were as dust – gone but not forgotten. At least not by him. Even the tough old war-dog, Chapter Master Levianus, was dead and gone, his ashes entombed in the halls of Macragge, placed within a bronze urn at the feet of a seated statue of his likeness.

Only he was left.

He was not alone, not in a literal sense; the handful of legionaries around him, waiting with weapons trained upon the conveyor carriage doors bore the same Chapter livery that bedecked his own armoured form, but he felt little true kinship with them. He had been old by the time they were inducted into the XIII Legion. A relic of the Terran past. They paid him considerable respect – they knew of his battles and triumphs, though he never spoke of them – and they bowed their heads when he walked the decks of the Legion's warships. But that only served to emphasise the gulf that existed between them. They revered him, but in doing so elevated him beyond themselves. There was no true brotherhood between them. How could there be? They could not relate to him any more than he could to them.

The carriage reached the bottom of the shaft, and he clenched his immense powered fists, the servos and gears growling. A sheen of energy flickered over his colossal armoured knuckles, and electricity danced between his tapering fingers. He crouched, ready to attack.

Pistons groaned. Gears turned. Locking devices lifted.

It was time to kill. And then, finally, it would be time to die.

The conveyor doors opened.

Smoke filled the interior of the carriage, concealing the Word Bearers from sight. Sor Talgron heard the metallic clink of grenades as they were hurled into the enclosed space, just as he had expected.

'Lock!' he roared, and the siege squad responded instantly. As one, moving in perfectly drilled unison, they dropped to one knee, planting their shields in front of them. They were in close formation, their shields locked, forming a solid barrier. Those in the second rank lifted their shields high, protecting from above,

and those on the flanks turned their shields outwards. They butted up against the back of the conveyor carriage, using the reinforced plasteel wall to protect their rear, forming a nigh-on impenetrable shell. On ancient Terra that formation had been utilised by warriors armed only with spear and blade, but it proved equally effective here.

The grenades exploded, filling the space with fire and shrapnel, but the armoured shell held, protecting the legionaries within.

'Shroud!' ordered Sor Talgron, and every second shield in the front line was lifted long enough for blind grenades to be rolled out beneath them, bouncing and skittering into the chamber beyond. Then the shields slammed down again, echoing loudly.

The first bursts of gunfire cut through the smoke, impacting on the inside of the carriage and striking the reinforced shield wall. Las-fire for the most part. A few bolters.

A smattering of solid, high-velocity shells struck Sor Talgron's own shield, battering against it like a jackhammer, and he was pushed back a step even as he braced against it, feet sliding beneath him. The shield held, and he edged back into line, keeping the wall unbroken.

'Forward!' he barked, and the formation began to advance.

They moved slowly, one crunching step at a time, and they began to return fire, bolters resting on the edge of the gun ports cut into their upper rims. They directed their shots where tracer-fire gave away the enemies' positions. While they were firing blind, the choking smoke obscuring their vision as much as their foes', their fire was not intended to kill, rather to suppress.

The Word Bearer to Sor Talgron's right went down, a lucky shot taking him in the head, but the gap was filled instantly, another legionary stepping forward to take his place. The captain felt a precision round scream overhead, coming from behind him, and one of the enemy warriors fell dead – Loth and his recon squad had joined the fray. They had ridden down atop the conveyor, slipping through the top hatch only once the siege squad had pushed out into the chamber beyond.

The smoke was beginning to clear. Unaugmented humans – around a score of them – garbed in black and wearing full-faced rebreathers could be vaguely discerned in front and to either side, kneeling behind hastily reinforced barricades.

Sor Talgron's auto-senses locked onto three enemy legionaries amongst them. These three wore red helms rather than the usual cobalt-blue. An honour rank, most likely, denoting them as veterans or perhaps a bodyguard unit.

Of more concern were a pair of servitor-controlled turrets rotating towards them, power couplings humming and shuddering with energy as they came online.

'Loth,' said Sor Talgron.

'I see them,' replied the recon sergeant, and the skull of one of the hard-wired servitor controllers disappeared, exploding into wet fragments.

The other locked onto the advancing legionaries, however, and armoured plates like the petals of a flower unfurled around the servitor. Its turret barrels lit up and fired as one.

There was a blinding flash and a roar of superheated air, and four incandescent beams tore through the dissipating smoke. Three Word Bearers were bisected; the refractor fields in their shields were useless against such energy. One of Loth's squad fell too, his left leg neatly severed below the hip as the beams passed right through the shield wall.

Another two Word Bearers were cut down by combined bolter and las-fire before the gaps in the shield wall were closed. They were only halfway across the hazy kill-zone, and the sentry laser array was humming loudly as it powered up to fire again. Sor Talgron was about to call for the formation to advance double-pace, taking them into blade-range, when a huge shape loomed out of the smoke, coming at them at a run.

'*For Ultramar*,' it bellowed. The sound of its pounding footfalls made the entire metal concourse shudder.

'Break!' roared Sor Talgron. 'Break!'

SEVEN

Korolos' memories of the early days of the Great Crusade were stark. Those dawning years had been proud, filled with hope and certainty. The doubts had come later.

He remembered it so clearly. He could see the eldar bladesman before him, taunting him, drawing him on. The xenos commander was a blur of movement, cutting through the Harkon Geno troops like chaff. They *were* chaff, just augmented humans of the Imperial Army. So intent on killing the alien fiend had he been, so intent on claiming that honour, that he'd become isolated from the main vanguard. He had two hundred Ultramarines with him, cut off from the rest of the company – just as the enemy had intended.

The keening screams of the xenos haunted him, even now. The eldar had fallen upon them from all sides, cutting them down with their exotic, deadly weapons, tearing through the ranks on scything jetbike attack runs, their screaming witches somersaulting through whole squads, leaving severed limbs and shattered dreams in their wake.

He had lost more than just the one hundred and seventy-four loyal sons of Ultramar that day, more than the additional three hundred and eighteen that had died coming to his aid. He had lost more than just his captaincy.

He had lost the respect of his Legion. He had lost respect for himself. Worst of all, he had seen disappointment in the eyes of his primarch. That disapproval had cut him to the core, and it was a wound that would never heal.

For seventeen years he wore his shame outwardly, fighting as a common legionary with his helm painted red, seeking an honourable death in battle. Finally, it had come for him. On Senosia IV he had collapsed, surrounded by a circle of slain foes, blood spilling from his lips. At last he would have peace.

But even then, his trial was not yet done. The oblivion he craved was not to be his fate.

He had fallen as Brother Aventine Koriol, but he had awoken again in an armoured shell, that he might live on. He bore his new name, Korolos, engraved upon his chest-plate, yet his shame was not lessened in this new incarnation. His pain was as strong as ever. He had not yet done enough to atone for his misdeeds to be allowed the peace of oblivion. How could he *ever* atone?

He saw the Word Bearers before him now as grey, pixelated blurs. Blinking target locks identified them, and he processed the abundance of information delivered directly into his cortex in a nanosecond – the power levels of their armour, their heart-rates, the clipped commands being streamed back and forth across their vox-network, the mark and place of manufacture of their armour plate, the model and threat-level of their weaponry.

Within the stinking amniotic fluid of his cramped sarcophagus, his atrophied claw-like hands twitched, and the immense power-fists of his newer, mechanical flesh clenched into fists. He vocalised his anger, shame and frustration as he thundered towards them. While a few errant bubbles did escape his withered organic throat, the roar that blared from the vox-emitters on his carapace was the bellow of a beast of iron and rage.

Sor Talgron walked beneath the mountain, his steps echoing in the empty silence. The halls were narrow but tall, their upper reaches brightly lit in sterile white light. There were no shadows in the prison complex known as the Vault. There was nowhere to hide.

His path was circuitous and winding, but he did not hesitate. The data-upload of the complex's layout guided him on. The doors, elevators and corridors that he passed were heavily reinforced, security locked and encoded, but those before him opened willingly, ushering him deeper into the belly of the mountain. Everything had been organised. His way had been cleared. He would encounter no resistance and no difficulties.

He had not seen a soul since disembarking from the black ornithopter that had brought him here to Khangba Marwu, far beneath the icy peak of Rakaposhi. Stepping onto the landing pad, sunk hundreds of metres below the mountain's

surface, there had been no welcoming party, no armed guards, no security detail. Sentry cannons sat idle, their barrels turned passively aside. The entrance into the vast prison complex lay open before him, the adamantium-reinforced portal gaping, beckoning him in.

The complex was one of the most highly secure locations on Terra, yet Sor Talgron walked straight into it without any challenge. A hint of a smile touched his lips, though none would have seen it, hidden beneath the barbarous scowl of his battle helm, even if there had been anyone nearby.

Ceiling-mounted pict-recorders turned aside at his approach. There would be no record of his passing in the data archives.

A green, blinking icon in the corner of his eye indicated that he was approaching his destination. He tapped a code into a keypad, which retracted sharply into its console, and a wall panel slid aside to reveal a black screen. Sor Talgron removed his helm and stared into its depths as a retinal scan was conducted. The bulk of the Vault's security protocols had been overridden, but a few of these last measures were not so simply bypassed. Nevertheless, his biometrics had been inputted into the system and marked with the highest clearance – at least in this one small sub-section of the gaol.

The door's interlocking mesh-fingers released their grip, and the two halves of the portal slid aside. Sor Talgron stepped through into a small holding area similar to an airlock on a void-capable ship. He saw himself reflected in the mirrored windows on either side of the cell – a hulking, grey warrior in functional, brutish Iron armour. The lenses of his helmet glowed like burning embers. His worn battleplate looked out of context in these clinical, harshly lit surrounds. He was an anomaly here.

His suit's internal systems told him that he was being scanned, checking him against the data that had been logged into the system at Dorn's order. He resisted the urge to clench his fists.

A moment later, whatever security protocols were in play were met and the last door retracted before him, allowing Sor Talgron access to the prisoner beyond.

The room was circular and expansive, and targeting icons instantly flashed up on his helm's visor display, latching onto the autocannon-slaved servitor turrets hanging from the ceiling. They were surgically grafted into articulated cupolas at various points around the room, hardwired to their mono-task. He watched them cautiously, but they panned by, not appearing to register his presence. Sor Talgron blink-scrolled the icons away and stepped across the threshold.

In the centre of the room was a fully enclosed cylindrical cell. The curved walls

were made of thick armourglass, revealing the occupant within – a figure with the build of one of the Legiones Astartes, kneeling as if in meditation, or perhaps even prayer. Sor Talgron walked closer, studying him.

He was clad in a yellow prison bodyglove which did nothing to hide his immense physique, and he sat motionless with his hands upon his thighs, legs folded underneath him and eyes closed. His eyelids were tattooed – as was the entire left half of his face – with Colchisian cuneiform. His hair was black gone to grey and shoulder-length, and he wore it braided at his temples in the manner of an acolyte in the Colchisian custom. He had bone and iron earrings hanging from his lobes, another concession to the customs of the homeworld of the Urizen. His skin was the colour of rich teak, and deeply lined.

Sor Talgron hit the simple, coded door release and stepped inside. The walls within were frosted and impermeable – one-way glass. Sor Talgron removed his helmet, and the other Word Bearer opened his eyes, slowly, as though waking from a deep sleep.

'I knew you were coming,' said the prisoner. 'I foresaw it.'

He stood, hefting himself to his feet. He was big, almost as tall as Sor Talgron in his armour. His eyes were dark and severe, with flecks of gold swimming in their depths.

'Predicant Volkhar Wreth,' said Sor Talgron, bowing in respect. 'It has been a long time.'

The prisoner smiled, exposing dark metal teeth.

'I have not heard that title in many years,' he said. 'It's good to see you, lad.'

'Put this on,' said Sor Talgron, tossing a plain robe to him. 'It's time you left this place.'

They encountered no one on their way out. Everything had gone as planned. There had been no unexpected complications.

Sor Talgron and Volkhar Wreth boarded the ornithopter, the latter cloaked and hooded, his features hidden from those who might casually recognise him.

The light craft's gull-wing doors sealed, muting the ascending whine of its pinion engines and cutting them off from the icy low-oxygenated air outside. The ornithopter rose up the volcanized vertical shaft, blast shutters capable of withstanding orbital bombardment opening above to allow them through.

'The rumours are true, then,' said Volkhar Wreth.

'They are,' said Sor Talgron. With his helm back on, his voice was transformed into its usual mechanical growl.

‘Tell me everything,’ said Wreth.

It was a Contemptor, a hulking machine of adamantium and ceramite, and it smashed into the Word Bearers with the force of an assault ram.

Easily as tall as three legionaries, it covered the ground in swift, thunderous steps and smashed four of them aside with the first sweep of an arm. Shields crumpled and bones were shattered as the legionaries were sent flying, crashing against the wall five metres away. Another was crunched beneath its heavy tread, and three more smashed aside, limbs flailing as they were hurled through the air by its next blow.

The shield wall shattered.

Bolts and gouts of plasma did nothing to slow the beast as the Word Bearers backed away, firing into its armoured chassis. It grabbed one around the torso, massive fingers circling his body, and unleashed the fury of the meltagun implanted into its palm. A searing hole was scorched through the legionary, and it tossed the dead warrior aside.

The Ultramarines and Imperial Army soldiers around the perimeter had risen from cover, the bolters and lasguns in their hands barking and snapping as they fired upon the disarrayed Word Bearers. One of the XIII Legion warriors vaulted a barricade and buried a sparking power axe in the head of a Word Bearer. In answer, Sor Talgron stepped forwards and slammed his boarding shield into the Ultramarine, sending him reeling, then levelled his bolter to finish him off. Before he could pull the trigger, an overcharged las-blast glanced off his shoulder pad, knocking him off-balance and sending his kill-shot wide. He stepped back to join his legionaries, bolter barking in his hand.

Another Ultramarine, armed with a modified long-barrelled bolter, snapped off two quick shots, taking out two more of Sor Talgron’s warriors, his shots shearing through the armour of their helms like nails driven through eggshells. Specialist ammunition, Sor Talgron registered, more from the sound of the projectiles than their effect.

Kraken bolts.

From the corner of his eye he saw Jarulek roll under the Contemptor’s arm as the Dreadnought swung at him. The Dark Apostle came smoothly to his feet and brained a black-armoured enemy soldier, his crozius hissing and spitting with energy.

The servitor-driven laser destroyer whined as it reached full power once more, and Sor Talgron saw the ident-runes of two more of his legionaries fade into

darkness in the corner of his display, slain as the laser destroyer fired.

Sor Talgron moved away from the murderous juggernaut that was the Contemptor, his measured fire taking out one of the Ultramarines – a plainly armoured legionary yet to earn any adornments of rank or honour. He ran dry and mag-locked his bolter at his hip, drawing his newly acquired volkite pistol smoothly. His first shot blew out the chest of a soldier. Flames jetted from the dying man's back, incinerating another.

'Spread out!' he ordered. 'Dal Ahk,' he said, activating his vox-link. 'How long?'

'*Inbound*,' came Dal Ahk's reply. '*Thirty seconds*.'

The Contemptor turned its massive, red helm, its murderous gaze locking onto Sor Talgron. It had heard his orders, he realised. It recognised him as a ranking officer. It came around, lurching in his direction with a grind of gears and servos. It raised one of its huge, simian arms as it charged, and flames gushed from the palm of its taloned hand.

Sor Talgron lifted his boarding shield to bear the brunt of the burning promethium. He backed away, his shield arm on fire, and fired his pistol, aiming at the Contemptor's head. His shots left scorched craters in its visor, but did not slow it, and Sor Talgron hurled himself to the side as it swung for him. It caught him a glancing blow, buckling his shield and staggering him into a plasteel pillar. The Contemptor stalked towards him, the light of its eye lenses glowing balefully.

A heavy blow to its mechanised knee knocked it off-balance, and it staggered, crashing to one knee and steadying itself with a hand on the ground. Sergeant Telakhas brought his thunder hammer around for another strike, aimed at the same joint – it was easily capable of damaging even such a machine as a Contemptor. If the blow connected, it would cripple the massive beast.

The blow did not connect.

The Contemptor caught the swing in its free fist. Its massive fingers closed around the siege sergeant's forearms, crumpling his vambraces like tin and snapping both wrists. Helpless, the struggling legionary was lifted off the ground – the Contemptor brought its other fist up, splaying its fingers to reveal its palm-mounted flamer, the pilot light glowing blue. Telakhas roared as he was bathed in burning promethium. His roar became a scream as his armour blackened and cracked, and his flesh began to cook. The Dreadnought ended his agonised cries, snatching up his flailing legs and ripping him apart in one violent motion. It hurled his remains in different directions, and swung back towards Sor

Talgron.

Nevertheless Telakhas' death had bought them much needed time. The countdown on Sor Talgron's visor display blinked to zero.

There was a blinding flash and a sharp bang of displacing air. Five figures appeared where there had been none before, standing in a protective cordon around the captain. Shimmering light coalesced across the massive curved plates of their Cataphractii-armoured forms.

'Take it down,' ordered Sor Talgron.

EIGHT

Octavion watched on a small, crackling, monochrome pict-feed set into the communications bank as the battle swung in favour of the Word Bearers.

On another screen, a number was blinking. One minute and thirty-five seconds. Thirty-four. Thirty-three. *Too long*, he thought.

Since the start of the conflict, the XVII Legion forces had controlled the flow of communications. Some viral, invasive scrapcode had been unleashed on the defenders, rendering the vast majority of their vox-transmissions indecipherable and garbled. Worse, sometimes the comms appeared to work clearly, but the orders transmitted were false, the original message twisted and reworked, resulting in several decisive losses until Chapter Master Decimus had ordered them disabled completely, relying only on short-ranged closed-transmissions.

Only two communications arrays on the planet had remained immune to the viral scrapcode. One of those had been in the city of Massilea, situated at the heart of the planet's single continent. The second was the long-ranged transmitter hub in which he now stood, the command centre lying deep beneath the mountains. Now, it was the only way that they could communicate with anything in orbit or beyond.

Thirty-six hours earlier, Decimus had settled on one desperate last throw of the dice.

The enemy had thought that the entire fleet had been destroyed. They were wrong.

One vessel remained – the immense *Righteous Fury*, pride of the sector. It had been crippled in the devastating void battle, but it was not yet done. Without engine power, it was orbiting the planet along with the wreckage and detritus of the fleet. The Word Bearers had been thorough in their executions, but not thorough enough in checking if any of the bodies already there still had a pulse.

Spinning slowly, and orbiting the planet once every eight and a half hours, it had merely been arithmetic to determine the precise moment when the ship would be in the right position.

The sound of the desperate battle beyond the sealed pneumatic doors was muted, but Octavion felt every death like a lance through his soul. The floor shuddered each time the Contemptor stepped. It would not be long before it fell. Korolos deserved that peace, but Octavion hoped more than anything that he could hold out just a little longer.

Forty-five seconds. Forty-four. Forty-three.

It had been a shock to realise that they had been followed. A sense of frustration had beset the shamed Ultramarines when they had realised that the Word Bearers had found them, and that they may yet fail in this last, redemptive task. That could not be allowed. They had been relieved when Octavion had volunteered to be the one to stay in the command centre, to give the fatal order, while the others would go and stall the enemy as long as they were able. It was not a role that he relished, but it was necessary.

Twenty seconds.

He glanced at the small screen. Word Bearers were scattered across the floor out there, but it was not enough. The black-armoured Imperial Army veterans were all slain, as were his other censured Legion brothers. Korolos stood alone.

The Contemptor had killed several of the newly arrived Cataphractii, but they surrounded him now like hounds around a bear. One of the Dreadnought's arms was hanging useless, and it was limping markedly. Its armour plates were hanging off in ragged sheafs where the Terminators had hacked at it with power blades and chainfists, from all sides. It would not be long.

Four seconds. Three. Two.

Octavion tapped a sequence on the keypad of the antiquated control panel, establishing a direct link with the *Righteous Fury*.

The main screen remained blank.

'Come on,' he breathed. 'Come on!'

He tapped another series of keys, and the screen refreshed. A grainy image of a woman's face appeared – her eyes were hollow, and there was a hastily stitched

wound on her brow. Ash, or perhaps blood, was smeared across her face. Her epaulettes marked her as an admiral. Behind her, the bridge of the once-hallowed ship was dark. He knew her, though he had never spoken to her himself.

'–there?' came her static-infused voice.

'Repeat, Admiral Solontine,' said Octavion. 'Can you hear me?'

'There is some interference, but yes,' said the woman on the screen. The sound was not in synch with the image, making it oddly disjointed. *'Who are you? I was expecting Decimus.'*

'I am Brother Xion Octavion. Chapter Master Decimus entrusted me with the responsibility of giving the order.'

'You have the authorisation override?'

'I do.'

'Key it in now.'

Each of the legionaries assigned to this task had memorised the authorisation code. Octavion keyed in the seventeen-digit number.

'Authorisation override accepted,' said Admiral Solontine. She rubbed a hand across her face. *'This is the end, then. I had hoped it would not come to this.'*

She knew as well as he did that as soon as she gave the order, she was committing herself and her ship to death. Octavion glanced over at the pict-feed from beyond the sealed doors behind him.

'Uploading targeting coordinates,' he said.

'Upload connected and processing. All arming decks are ready to fire.'

'It needs to be done, now.'

'We are not yet in position, Legionary Octavion.'

'What?'

'A minor complication,' said Solontine. *'A collision. Space debris. Part of the* Fist of Ultramar *nudged us. Nothing too bad, but it has slowed the momentum of our turn.'*

'Will you still be able to complete this mission?'

'*Yes*,' she said. *'We will be in position in less than seven minutes.'*

'Seven minutes,' said Octavion. He cursed. 'We do not have seven minutes.'

'Is there a problem, legionary?'

'Yes, there is a problem. Can't you bring your ship around faster?'

'We are dead in the water,' said the admiral. *'We have no engine power, and even if we did, the enemy fleet would detect us as soon as we engaged the drive motors. Seven minutes. Keep the upload feed running.*'

'If I destroy these consoles…'

‘Then you destroy all hope,’ snapped Solontine. *‘I have no targeting guidance. All my systems are down. I need this line to stay open. With that frame of reference, I can bring the guns to bear manually. Do not let the enemy get into that room.’*

Octavion stared at the consoles in helpless desperation. Was this how it was going to end? In failure?

‘I will hold them,’ he said. ‘You will have the time you need.’

The hall was empty. Scaffolding was set against the walls, but it sat half-finished and unused, as if the workers had abandoned their work before it was done. Dust, masonry and dried paint flecks covered the floor. It was not difficult to imagine that these halls had been empty for months, perhaps years.

The curved ceiling was emblazoned with a faded fresco, the plasterwork beneath it crumbling and flaking. In its prime, the artwork would have been glorious: in its centre was a heroic portrayal of the Emperor, wreathed in golden light and flame, and around him were gathered stylised figures representing the Legiones Astartes. All the colours of the Legions were there. Orbiting around the Emperor were the planets of the Solar System, and beyond them, the constellations. Imperial ships filled the void, spreading out towards every corner of the fresco’s edges. Work had commenced on its restoration – and the repainting of a handful of warriors in new Legion colours. The most skilled artisans would have been brought in to duplicate the masterwork of the original and bring it back to its former glory, before their efforts had been abandoned.

The stonework here had also been undergoing repairs. Tools lay scattered across the floor, and half-carved statuary stood unfinished. Huge blocks of unworked stone were trussed up with canvas and rope, and machinery lay half-hidden beneath tarpaulins, debris and dust.

Perhaps the restoration had been deemed surplus to requirements and the crews reassigned elsewhere when Dorn had begun the process of fortifying the palace, or perhaps it had been abandoned decades earlier and forgotten amidst the bureaucracy of the Council. Either way, what was important was that it was an unused, old section of the palace, a lower wing that had been discarded and overlooked. It served Sor Talgron’s purpose, and that was all that mattered.

‘This is not the way to the shuttle decks, Sor Talgron,’ Volkhar Wreth said.

‘There is one last task that must be performed before we leave Terra, honoured predicant,’ Sor Talgron replied. ‘Something Lord Aurelian asked of me in person.’

‘He asked you himself? Your star must be in the ascendant within the Legion,’ said Wreth.

‘As you predicted when I was an aspirant,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘I am captain of the Thirty-Fourth now.’

‘You have done well,’ said Predicant Wreth.

‘You taught *me well.’*

Sor Talgron picked his way through the debris, plaster chips crunching beneath his armoured boots. Wreth ghosted him, stepping more lightly. The captain pulled aside a heavy canvas drop sheet, throwing up a cloud of dust. Behind it, obscured by more collapsed scaffolding and other junk, was a set of stairs. The steps were worn by time – once, they must have been frequently used. Sor Talgron descended into the gloom, and his Legion-brother followed.

Sound was muffled down in the low-ceilinged darkness. The buzzing of Sor Talgron’s armour sounded like a swarm of angry insects. Arched passages led off in different directions, but Sor Talgron walked straight. A flickering orange light in the distance drew him on.

They passed carved niches and hollows, all of them blockaded by chained iron gates and ferrocrete. Volkhar Wreth paused beside one of them, brushing his fingertips across its seal – an eagle’s head atop crossed thunderbolts.

‘Pre-Unity,’ he breathed.

‘This whole section of the Imperial Palace is old,’ said Sor Talgron, looking back at him. In the darkness, his lenses gleamed like the reflective eyes of a predator.

‘Very old,’ Wreth agreed.

‘And abandoned,’ said Sor Talgron, turning away.

‘There were those amongst the Crusader Host who felt they were abandoned,’ said Wreth. ‘Stuck here on Terra while their Legions were out there among the stars, doing what we were made to do.’

‘And you? Did you feel that way?’ said Sor Talgron over his shoulder.

‘Never,’ said Wreth. ‘My faith in the God-Emperor carried me through. As I said, I knew you were coming.’

‘I have never held much stock in visions and prophecies,’ said Sor Talgron.

‘That doesn’t mean they are not real.’

Sor Talgron did not answer. He simply walked on, drawn to the flickering light ahead of them. It was clear now that it was a candle.

At the end of the passage, one of the sealed archways had been opened. Lengths of chain lay spread upon the stone floor. A single wick burned within, sitting in a

pool of melted red wax atop a stone block carved with intricate figures and dense lettering. The block had been pushed up against the far wall, revealing a gaping square hole where several more had been removed. Dozens of stones of all sizes were stacked low around the walls. Eight carved burial niches lined the walls.

Several sets of human remains, long dead, lay upon the floor; they had clearly been dragged from the burial niches. Some had tumbled face down on the floor, while others were just pushed roughly aside, snapping their bones likes twigs in the process. Those that were still recognisable as bodies were skeletal and ancient, with yellowed, dried-paper skin and clumps of hair clinging to desiccated flesh. They were bedecked in ancient armour that nevertheless bore some similarity to the plate worn by the Legiones Astartes.

There were eight bodies in all, one for each of the arched niches. In their place, eight curved caskets had been placed.

'Welcome, brothers,' said a voice in the darkness.

NINE

All resistance in the room was neutralised. The only living enemy remaining was the Contemptor, if you could call it living. Sor Talgron did not. Trapped in darkness, confined in a box. That was no life.

Three of the Cataphractii had been slain before it had fallen. Not even their vaunted armour was protection against its fists.

It was laid low, a battered heap of metal and ceramite, yet still it struggled to fight and kill. One of its arms was gone, and its lower half was malfunctioning. It lay on the ground, struggling to push itself upright. Its chest had been breached, and sickly, foul-smelling fluid was leaking from within.

The surviving Word Bearers circled the downed behemoth, respecting its power even in death. Sor Talgron was holding the dead sergeant's thunder hammer. Uncoupled from its power source, it did not have the same kick, but it would do the job.

He smashed the hammer into the Contemptor's oversized red helm. The Dreadnought reached for him, but it was a clumsy attempt and easily avoided – there was no strength left in the beast. Another three strikes knocked the helmet loose, rendering the Dreadnought blind.

'Take off its arm,' he ordered.

The two Cataphractii stepped in. One of them pinned the giant's limb down, testimony to how weak the Contemptor was – minutes earlier, it would have crumpled the Terminator in one fist had he dared come so close.

A chainfist shrieked. Oil spurted and sparks filled the air. Then it was done.

With both arms amputated, and its legs twitching spasmodically, the machine was helpless. It lay on its back, jerking.

'*Kill… me…*' it drawled.

Sor Talgron nodded to the Cataphractii. They wrenched the Dreadnought's ruptured breastplate apart, widening the breach. Sickly fluid gushed forth.

Within, suspended in a web of cables, tubes and pipes was a wretched, wasted corpse – some XIII Legion hero of ages past. Was this his reward for years of service, Sor Talgron wondered? It was a cruel fate, if so.

It twitched, and a croak escaped its rotten lips. It was piteous. It repulsed him.

The hammer ended its torment. Sor Talgron tossed the weapon away in disgust, and turned towards the sealed door. He was about to order it smashed down, but it opened of its own accord.

A lone Ultramarine walked out to meet them. He was unarmed, and perhaps that was what stayed Sor Talgron's hand, stopping him from having the fool gunned down immediately.

Like the Dreadnought, the Ultramarine had a red helm, though his was hung at his waist, leaving his head bare. He was looking down, hair hanging over his face.

Sor Talgron felt an uncomfortable buzzing against the inside of his skull. It felt as though something was trying to scratch its way out. He shook his head to rid himself of the sensation.

The Ultramarine looked up.

White flames spilled from his eyes.

Sor Talgron stepped into the dark chamber, noting the sudden drop in air temperature.

'Enough of the theatrics, Jarulek,' said Sor Talgron, the grilled vocalizer in his helmet rendering his words into an inhuman, crackling snarl. 'We do not have much time.'

'Everything is in readiness,' said the Dark Apostle, rising from the shadows. He was garbed from head to toe in a heavy, dark robe, his face hidden to the naked eye. Sor Talgron had seen him instantly, his helmet stripping away the shadow of his cowl and the thermal image glowing hot against the stone. But to Volkhar Wreth he must have appeared like a wraith, rising from the dead. The predicant's eyes were wide.

'Any problems?' said Sor Talgron, glancing back the way that they had come.

He knelt and picked up a length of chain from the floor.

'No one's been down here,' said Jarulek, pulling back his hood. His head was shaved to the scalp, like an ascetic, and his skin was pulled taut across his skull. His eye sockets were sunken and dark.

'What is this?' hissed Wreth. 'Why do we delay here?'

'Predicant Volkhar Wreth,' said Jarulek, bowing his head. 'It is an honour.'

Wreth nodded vaguely in return. He brushed past the Dark Apostle, picking his way amongst the ancient dead to halt before the nearest casket. Green lights blinked from the panel on its side. He wiped a hand across the curved surface of its lid, brushing aside a coating of frost. On the other side of the crystal, a face was revealed.

'Life signs?' said Sor Talgron, wrapping the length of chain around his hand.

'All strong, captain,' said Jarulek.

'You are certain this will work?'

'It will work.'

'What is this?' said Wreth once again. The figure within the casket wore a close-fitting metal cap studded with crystals, diodes and wires. There were markings upon his naked flesh, and Wreth leaned in to see more clearly. His breath misted the air before him. 'Who are they?'

'A battery,' said Jarulek. 'A very powerful battery.'

'To power what?'

'They are psykers taken from the Hollow Mountain,' said Sor Talgron. 'All within that hated fastness are those the Imperium deems too uncontrollable, too weak or too old to be of use. They were doomed to die.'

'For the good of the Imperium,' said Jarulek, his voice thick with venom.

'These ones will still die,' Sor Talgron went on. 'Only now they will die for a more noble purpose.'

'They've been… mutilated,' said Wreth, his face close to the casket's lid. The dormant psyker within had runes and markings cut into his flesh. The wounds were red-rimmed and septic.

'You wear Colchisian writing, but you're Terran-born, aren't you?' said Jarulek, coming closer.

'What of it? I have the primarch's blood in me, as do you,' Wreth snapped.

'There are… markedly fewer Terrans within the Legion of late,' said Sor Talgron. Volkhar Wreth looked at him, his brow furrowed, not understanding what was being said.

'Tell me, predicant,' said Jarulek. 'What would you be willing to give up, if

Lorgar himself asked it?'

'Anything,' replied Wreth instantly.

'You would surrender your life?'

'Of course.'

'Excellent.'

Predicant Wreth looked around sharply as he heard the murderous intent in Jarulek's voice, turning his back on Sor Talgron. Before he could react, Sor Talgron looped a length of chain around the predicant's neck, like a garrotte. He yanked it tight, cutting off his airway and pulling him off-balance. Wreth's hand went instantly to the choking chain, struggling to breathe. Using his colossal, armour-enhanced strength, Sor Talgron hauled Volkhar Wreth around to face Jarulek.

The Dark Apostle threw off his robe. Beneath it he was unarmoured and stripped to the waist, his tattooed torso exposed. The candlelight rippled across his skin, making the symbols and intricate Colchisian cuneiform emblazoned upon him dance.

'I too bear the word of our lord upon my flesh,' he said. 'The message has changed somewhat in recent times, however.'

He had a knife in his hand, and he stepped in to drive it into the predicant's body.

'This is the will of Lorgar,' he snarled.

Holding onto the chain with both hands, Volkhar Wreth lifted himself and slammed both feet squarely into Jarulek's chest. The force of the blow knocked Jarulek back, and drove Sor Talgron into one of the stasis-caskets, sliding it half a metre to the side with a screech of metal. The captain's helmet crunched into the low arch above, and his grip on the chain loosened.

Wreth tore himself free and rose to his feet as Jarulek lunged at him. He grabbed Jarulek's wrist as the Dark Apostle's knife flashed in the gloom, guiding it past him and twisting sharply, overextending the joint. With his other hand he grabbed Jarulek's shoulder and, using his momentum against him, drove the Dark Apostle's face onto the edge of the stone plinth.

He tore the knife from Jarulek's hand and spun, coming to face Sor Talgron. The Word Bearers captain was blocking his way out.

'What in the Emperor's name is going on?' he hissed.

'The Urizen has had a change of heart regarding the Emperor,' said Jarulek, as he made to rise, blood dripping from his face.

'This is insane,' said Wreth. 'The Seventeenth would never turn.'

‘There were those who were resistant,’ said Sor Talgron.

‘That knife in your hand has spilled plenty of Legion blood,’ added Jarulek.

‘You are the last of your kind, old friend,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘The last Terran-born Word Bearer who has not embraced the new path. The purge is almost complete.’

‘New path?’ said Wreth. ‘What madness is this?’

‘At Monarchia, the Emperor rebuked us for worshipping him as a god,’ said Jarulek. He shrugged. ‘We found new ones. Well, old *ones…’*

‘You’ve been away from the Legion too long,’ said Sor Talgron.

‘You haven’t got a religious bone in your body, lad,’ spat Wreth. ‘This is not some holy endeavour. You’ve become traitors, nothing more.’

‘No,’ said Jarulek. ‘We’ve become enlightened.’

‘Why did you release me? Why didn’t you just let me rot with the others of the Crusader Host?’

‘You’d only have been executed, in time,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘The truth will out. Always, the truth will out. You think Dorn would let you live once he knew that the Seventeenth had pledged for Horus? This way, you may still serve the Legion. This way, your death has a meaning. A purpose.’

‘What have you become, Sor Talgron?’ said Wreth. ‘You are not the warrior that I knew. He would never have betrayed the Imperium. Never in a thousand years. Something has happened to you, some corruption has eroded your soul.’

‘I am exactly *the man that you knew,’ snarled Sor Talgron. ‘The Legion is my life. It has always been so. Would it have been better to have betrayed the Seventeenth? Is that what the man you knew would have done? Would he have betrayed Lord Aurelian?’*

‘The one I knew understood the difference between right and wrong.’

‘What’s right and what’s wrong is determined by the victor,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘I am a soldier, just as I always was. I do as I am ordered. Nothing has changed.’

‘Then damn you, and damn the Legion,’ said Volkhar Wreth, stepping towards him, clutching Jarulek’s knife.

‘Kill him!’ Sor Talgron shouted, too late.

The Ultramarine swept his arm in front of him, from left to right, in the manner of one clearing a table in a fit of pique. Every Word Bearer was hurled backwards by a colossal barrage of unseen force.

They were slammed against the far wall, which bent and buckled beneath them. The unseen force did not relent, either. It continued to press upon the Word

Bearers, pinning them in place. It was as though the axis of reality in the room had suddenly changed, making the back wall *down*, and the gravity increased ten-fold.

The Ultramarine had risen off the floor, his feet hovering just above it. His arms were outspread, palms up, and white flames were rising from his hands as well as spilling from his eyes. His teeth were bared in a vicious snarl.

The force pressing upon Sor Talgron made it feel like the weight of a battle tank was on his chest, making breathing difficult. His arms and legs were pinned against the wall, and in spite of all his strength, enhanced by the fibre-bundles and servos of his armour, he could not pull himself free, nor even raise a weapon against his enemy.

Yet, despite the tonnage of force pressing against him, a bark of laughter escaped his lips.

The Ultramarine turned his fiery gaze upon Sor Talgron.

'You find your end amusing, traitor?' he said. His voice sounded like a dozen voices blurred together.

'You are as much a traitor as I,' said Sor Talgron. 'You go against the Emperor's decree.'

'You have no moral right to condemn me,' said the Ultramarine, multiple voices overlapping.

Sor Talgron laughed again, with considerable difficulty. 'I do not need to condemn you. Your actions do that for me.'

'You speak poison, traitor,' said the Ultramarine. 'My infraction is as nothing next to the scale of your treachery.'

'Such is how all treachery is born – by small degrees,' said Sor Talgron. He strained to lift his weapon again, but he could not. He might as well try to lift a mountain, so strong was the force ranged against him. 'But there is no grey area here. There is only obeying, and disobeying. You've turned against the word of the Emperor. In his eyes, you are no different from any of us. He ordered the death of one of his own sons for it – why do you think he would forgive you?'

The Ultramarine pressed his arms outwards, as if pushing on a heavy weight. The force holding the Word Bearers intensified. Sor Talgron's armour groaned. It could not take much more than this.

'You… are… as… damned… as… *us*…' he snarled.

'Enough,' yelled the Ultramarine, thrusting a hand towards Sor Talgron, fingers tightening like he was gripping something. Sor Talgron's throat was constricted suddenly, closing off his windpipe. 'This world is going to burn, and you and all

your traitorous legionaries will burn with it.'

With one hand extended, holding the Word Bearers in place, the damned Librarian drew a plasma pistol. He aimed, taking his time, and fired. There was a searing flash of heat and light, and one of Sor Talgron's legionaries was slain, cored through his midsection. The air filled with the stink of melting flesh and acrid plasma discharge.

The Word Bearers strained against the psychic pressure pinning them in place, but it was no good. None of them could move.

The Librarian's pistol was venting super-heated vapour from its power coils. He lowered its barrel at his next target – Sor Talgron. The captain's face was purple, the invisible grip of iron still clamped around his throat.

Jarulek spoke then. His words made the scratching inside Sor Talgron's mind intensify sharply, and he might have cried out had he been able to breathe. It felt as though some taloned thing inside his skull was straining desperately to get out. He felt a trickle of blood run from his nose.

The Dark Apostle's words were guttural and harsh, and not in any way human in origin. They were an aberration, the sounds not ones that any being born of the material realm had any right to utter. It was a calling, a summoning of beings beyond the veil of reality.

And in defiance of all rational logic, that call was answered.

The buzzing in Sor Talgron's head could have been the sound of a faulty vox picking up nothing but static, or the incessant burr of a million insects. Behind the crackling noise he could hear the chittering of inhuman voices and the cutting cry of newborns. It was an uneasy, disconcerting sound, and it was getting steadily louder.

Every lumen strip in the room exploded, scattering shards of broken glass in all directions. The chittering voices were suddenly in the room with them. The only light was the dull electronic glow of a data-screen coming from the chamber beyond. The electric buzz in the air reached a painful resonance.

With a sound like paper ripping, a pair of shadows detached themselves from the surrounding darkness. They descended upon the Librarian, drifting towards him like moths to a candle, like leeches to blood. Each of the incorporeal shapes manifested a pair of long, spindly arms made of nothing more solid than darkness, the limbs extending from vaguely humanoid, skeletal torsos that tapered into nothingness below the waist.

They grappled with the Ultramarine, clawing his weapon arm with insubstantial talons, and his shot went wild, searing through the metal wall half a metre above

Sor Talgron's head. He felt the pressure against him lessen, and he sucked in a breath, gasping for air. Fighting against the pressing psychic power, he managed to shift his arm fractionally. His fingertips touched the grip of the volkite pistol holstered at his chest.

The shades surrounded the Librarian, coiling around him like serpents. One of them still held his weapon arm, fighting against him, while the other was scrabbling wildly for his throat. The Ultramarine fought them off, struggling to shove them away, but it was like clutching at smoke.

A third spectral shape materialised, emerging from the darkness and rearing up behind him. It grabbed the Ultramarine's head in its shadow-talons, and the Librarian roared as cold fingers pressed into his mind. The incorporeal being shuddered, dark un-light pulsing along its arms and into its being, and its presence grew more substantial. It was feeding on him, Sor Talgron realised. A mouth split open in its otherwise blank face, revealing rows of tiny, barbed teeth, and it breathed out a cloud of buzzing flies, accompanied by a stench like rotting flesh.

The other two spirits renewed their efforts. It was abundantly clear that the Librarian was about to be overcome.

With a roar, the Librarian threw a hand towards the wreckage of the Contemptor, lying lifeless on the floor. It was lifted into the air, and with a wild motion of the Ultramarine's arm, it was sent slamming into Jarulek.

The shades began to fade as the Dark Apostle's voice was silenced. They fought to remain in the material realm, clawing frantically for a foothold in real space, but they were drawn slowly back into shadow. They screamed and writhed, but then they were gone. The Librarian stood alone, breathing hard.

A single shot rang out, echoing loudly, and a hole was punched through the Ultramarine's chest. He collapsed backwards, following the trajectory of the high-velocity sniper round.

The weight pressing Sor Talgron to the wall fell away, and he pushed himself to his feet. He glanced back towards the conveyor. Loth was down on one knee, smoke drifting from the barrel of his long rifle.

'Good shot,' he growled. The recon sergeant shrugged.

Sor Talgron stalked over to the Librarian. The Ultramarine was slumped on the floor, blood pooling beneath him. Sor Talgron didn't need to be an Apothecary to see that the legionary would not survive.

'Desperation makes fools of us all,' he said. 'You didn't need to break the Nikaea edict. Now, you die a traitor.'

‘Perhaps,’ breathed the Ultramarine. ‘But you’ll… die… with…’

His voice trailed off as his life left him.

Sor Talgron frowned and turned away. The buzzing in his mind had finally gone, though it had left a pounding headache in his temples. Surprisingly, the flies that the shadow-daemon had breathed forth were all still there, lying dead on their backs with legs folded. They crunched beneath his boots.

Daemons. These were the new allies of the XVII Legion. Had he not been wearing his helmet he would have spat in disgust.

He saw two of his legionaries haul aside the wreckage of the Contemptor and help Dark Apostle Jarulek to his feet.

‘You’re alive, then,’ Sor Talgron commented, feeling nothing either way.

‘Captain, you need to see this,’ said Loth.

Sor Talgron followed the recon sergeant’s voice, and entered the small communications command centre. It was dominated by sensor arrays and data-screens awash with information.

‘What am I seeing?’ he said. He stabbed a finger at one of the screens. ‘Is that what I think it is?’

‘Yes,’ said Loth. ‘There’s an active Ultramarines ship up there in orbit.’

‘Give me audio on that screen there,’ said Sor Talgron, gesturing to where the image of a woman could be seen speaking.

‘–on third bombardment deck,’ the woman was saying as the audio connected to the visual feed. *‘Target solution is a lock. On my mark.’*

‘It’s preparing to fire,’ said Loth. ‘They’re using this connection to sequence its guidance systems.’

‘Kill the connection!’ barked Sor Talgron.

‘I’m trying,’ said Loth, punching in keys on the command console. ‘It’s locked me out.’

The woman on the screen turned to look at the Word Bearers. She was a fleet admiral, Sor Talgron saw by the pins on her lapel. A cold smile touched her thin lips.

‘I take it, then, that Legionary Xion Octavion is dead,’ she said. *‘He died a hero. Whatever he did bought the time I needed. You traitors are all going to burn.*’

Sor Talgron cursed and drew his volkite pistol, aiming it squarely in the centre of the command module. Loth stood and backed away, knocking his chair over in his haste.

The captain fired, emptying the weapon’s charge into the console. The whole

thing went up in sparks and flame, and the data-screens exploded.

Jarulek stood in the doorway, leaning on the supporting arm of a legionary. ‘What can one crippled ship do?’

‘There are still Ultramarines forces on this continent,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘They won’t target the battles for fear of killing their own legionaries. They wouldn’t sanction that. It is not in their nature. They’ll be targeting one of the muster points.’

Loth spat. In the silence that followed, Dal Ahk’s voice crackled through on the vox.

‘Captain! Enemy planet-strike ordnance inbound!’ he said. *‘Multiple targets!’*

TEN

Decimus was bleeding from a dozen wounds, and he clutched a chainaxe in blood-slick hands. He had lost his own weapons – and a number of those scavenged from fallen friends and foes – earlier in the battle. His muscles were burning, and his armour was hanging off him in ragged pieces. One of his lungs was deflated, and his secondary heart was pounding, picking up the slack from his primary heart, which had been pierced by shrapnel. He was aware of more than a dozen internal injuries that required immediate medicae attention.

He smashed the skull of a traitor beneath the butt of his axe, grimacing in pain as he struck. He tossed the chainaxe aside – it was missing so many teeth that it was little more than a bludgeon. He picked up the crude knife that the enemy legionary had been clutching. It was hot to the touch, and made his hand tingle strangely. Bile rose in his throat. He hurled the cursed blade away.

'Here, my lord,' said a wounded Ultramarines sergeant, proffering his power sword. The warrior was so drenched in blood that he could have been mistaken for a Word Bearer.

'My thanks, Sergeant Connor,' he said, and took the blade. He thumbed its activation rune and energy coalesced down its length. 'Macraggean?'

The sergeant nodded wearily. 'From the Crown Mountains themselves.'

The scream of an incoming artillery shell sent Ultramarines scrambling for cover. Decimus didn't bother. He could tell from the sound that it was a way off to his left. A hot wind tore across the corpse-strewn plain, and the choking

clouds parted momentarily in the backwash of an unseen blast.

The enemy was coming for them once again, lines of legionaries and Dreadnoughts advancing alongside Vindicators and Predators. There were still thousands of them.

'My lord,' came a shout. He was too weary even to register who it was that had spoken. 'My lord, look!'

Lifting his gaze skyward, Aecus Decimus saw dozens of burning shapes falling through the upper atmosphere. Each was trailing a line of fire. He stood there in the mud and the blood, breathing hard. It was done.

'Reinforcements?' said one his legionaries, and Decimus felt a pang of shame. He had told no one but his most senior captains and the cadre of censured legionaries of his final order. It was better that way, he had decided.

There was a ragged cheer from a few of the men, thinking that their Chapter Master had confirmed the arrival of reinforcements. Others knew better, however.

'Those are not drop pods,' said Sergeant Connor in a low voice that only Decimus heard. 'Reinforcements are not coming, are they.' It was not a question.

'No,' he said. 'This planet is lost, and so are we. But we'll take all these traitor bastards with us.'

With the sergeant's aid, he climbed wearily to stand atop the ruined hulk of a Rhino, and he raised the power sword high for all to see. There were pitifully few of them left, but he saw pride burning in their eyes. Pride, and anger.

The first of the orbital strikes hit to the north. There was a blinding flash, and rising green flame mushroomed into the air beyond the horizon. The sound would not hit them for almost a minute, the Chapter Master judged. Others were coming down overhead, closer than the first.

History would not judge him harshly for this, but only because none of the XIII Legion would be left alive here once this was over, none to speak of what he had set in motion. No one would ever question *which* side had unleashed this horror upon a loyal world of the Five Hundred. The time for doubt was past.

'One last charge, sons of Ultramar,' he roared. 'One last charge, in the name of Guilliman and the Emperor.' He dropped off the Rhino, sinking half to his knees in the clinging mire. 'Come, my brothers. Honour and glory!'

'Honour and glory!' they answered as one.

The struggle did not last long. No contest between an armoured and unarmoured legionary would.

Sor Talgron caught Volkhar Wreth's hand in his fist as he stabbed at him. Bones crunched and the knife clattered to the floor. The predicant slammed his fist into the side of Sor Talgron's helmet, cracking a lens and denting the ceramite.

'That is all you get,' said Sor Talgron, the light of his cracked lens flickering.

He grabbed Wreth by the neck and slammed him bodily into a wall, once, twice, using all his servo-assisted strength. Bricks crumbled around Wreth, and he slumped to his knees. Stepping in close, Sor Talgron slammed a heavy backhand blow into the side of his head, felling him instantly.

Sor Talgron knelt over him, a knee in the centre of his back pinning him to the ground, and one hand pressing down upon the back of his head. He scooped up Jarulek's blade with his other hand. The hilt of the athame felt warm to the touch, even through his gauntlet.

'This is my mentor and a warrior who in his day was worthy even of the primarch's respect,' growled Sor Talgron. He had the blade of the athame pressed to the back of Volkhar Wreth's neck. 'I would not have him suffer needlessly.'

'It will work, captain,' Jarulek assured him.

'If it does not, I will cut your throat. I promise you that.'

Then he pushed the knife between Wreth's vertebrae, cutting into the spinal column.

The doors were already being eaten away before they arrived at the surface. The temperature in the conveyor had dropped markedly, and a harsh, alchemical stink was seeping through the vents. The lift cable overhead groaned. Sor Talgron wasn't sure they would make it to the top at all.

For the enemy to unleash world-killers was a stunning development. It was not a strategic possibility that he had even considered the XIII Legion undertaking.

'This world is going to die, along with countless thousands of the Seventeenth, yet you seem impressed,' said Jarulek.

'I am,' said Sor Talgron. 'I didn't think they had it in them.'

He had ordered the evacuation, but there was little chance that more than a fraction of his legionaries had made it off-world before the bombs had struck. Now, the vox was awash with static.

'We should have stayed down there,' said Jarulek.

'Be silent, priest,' snapped Sor Talgron. 'To stay there was a death sentence. We have to get off-world.'

'Look at what they have unleashed!' snarled Jarulek. A chemical mist was

seeping into the carriage, coming in through the vents and the cracks in the door. Tongues of pale flame licked up from where that mist touched bare metal. They reached for Jarulek, drawn to his gesture. ‘You thought it beyond them? This world is going to *burn*.’

Sor Talgron turned and shoved Jarulek up against the back wall, hand locked around his throat. ‘Your gods did not foresee this either, priest,’ he said. ‘It seems that we all misjudged just how much the Thirteenth hate us… How far they would go to see us bleed.’

He gave Jarulek a final shove, and turned away in disgust. It was not only disgust at the Dark Apostle, but everything – what the Legion had become, the weakness inherent in his genes, and his own actions on Terra, to name but a few.

‘To step out there is to die,’ said Jarulek. ‘There are other ways, other paths that can be walked. If one knows how.’

Cold fury rose within Sor Talgron.

‘I will not flee like a worm into a hole, leaving my legionaries to die,’ he said, casting a withering glare at Jarulek for a moment before turning his back on him.

‘So be it,’ breathed Jarulek.

The temperature inside the carriage dropped markedly, hoar frost creeping up the walls. A host of shadows and whispers swirled around the Word Bearers.

When Sor Talgron looked back, Jarulek was gone.

The conveyor came to a groaning halt. Already the metal was starting to buckle and collapse, being eaten away by the caustic chemical mist.

The doors opened. Beyond, the world burned.

ELEVEN

Phosphex, Roboute Guilliman would later write, was *'without a doubt singularly the most deplorable man-manufactured weapon that humanity has ever, to its shame, unleashed upon a living world'*.

An incendiary of the most volatile nature, it had the capacity to burn without oxygen and with next to no fuel source. It was capable of burning underwater – in fact, it set the water itself alight – and would burn through solid rock, through the most fire-hardened ceramite and adamantium, absolutely devastating any carbon-based life that it touched.

Known variously as the 'living fire', 'crawling death' and 'ice-fire' due to its attraction to movement and sub-zero burning temperature, once unleashed it expanded exponentially, burning everything in its path. It was designed for one purpose – the absolute eradication of life on a world. The taint of its residue was far more enduring even than the most deadly radiation from nuclear fallout and plasma-core exposure, rendering any lands exposed to its touch uninhabitable.

Not even the Death Guard favoured its use in any but the most extreme circumstances, and even then only on the order of a Legion's most senior echelons of command. The use of phosphex had only twice been sanctioned for use by the primarch of the XIII Legion, and then only upon isolated regions, but a small number of its most powerful warships held the munitions in their armouries still, for use in extremis.

Percepton Primus, Chapter Master Decimus had decreed, was such a case.

A single, man-portable phosphex bomb had the capacity to contaminate the air and soil where it was detonated for a thousand years. Never in Legion history had an entire ship's payload of phosphex warheads been unleashed in one bombardment. In theoretical simulations, a world that suffered such an attack would never recover.

In all, twenty-four Mortalis-class atmospheric missiles were launched from the *Righteous Fury* at the surface of Percepton Primus. All of them struck the planet's singular super-continent, spread across a dispersal zone ten thousand kilometres wide. Each targeted a key strategic location, the coordinates of which had been uploaded from the communications sub-base within the mountains – Word Bearers extraction points, the city of Massilea, the field of war where the Chapter Master had drawn the enemy legionaries in strength.

The *Righteous Fury* was destroyed with all hands three minutes and twenty-seven seconds after the first payload was launched. The XVII Legion cruiser *Sanctified* claimed the kill.

By then, the surface of Percepton Primus was already burning.

It was harder to remove a legionary's primary heart than one might expect, even one not wearing his armoured plate.

First there was the black carapace, the tough under-skin membrane that was as hard as guard-issued flak armour and tough enough to stop a solid slug. Once through that, cutting too high would hit the fused ribcage. Trying to hack through that was futile unless you were well-equipped; a Space Marine's bones were like iron, and their chest was one solid mass.

The key, Sor Talgron knew, was to come in under the ribcage. A deep, vertical slit just below the breastbone.

'It is a shame that Dorn is sending us away,' said Jarulek as he cut through flesh and sinew. 'All the guns of our fleet, sitting up there in the shipyards around Luna, waiting to be unleashed at the most opportune moment. That would have been… delightful.'

'Dorn is no fool,' said Sor Talgron. 'We knew this was a possibility, which is why we have our contingencies – the comet, the shipyards, our allies on Mars and such. The charges remain primed, yes?'

'They do,' said Jarulek. 'Loth did his job well. When they blow, they'll think the psychic levees simply overloaded. There will be mayhem. Panic. More importantly, they'll be blinded – it could take months before they are able to send or receive any astropathic missives beyond the Solar System.'

‘Good,’ said Sor Talgron.

‘Lord Aurelian will not be pleased that we are being shunted off Terra. If we were still garrisoned here when the final push came…’

‘We have done what we can in preparation,’ said Sol Talgron ‘We have used our time here well. And now for our last surprise…’

Volkhar Wreth lay paralysed and close to death on his back on the floor, atop a heavy canvas drop sheet stained dark with blood. They had stripped him of the robe he’d been wearing, and his yellow bodyglove had been cut away, baring his heavily muscled body. His skin was slick with gore. He gave a muted groan, his head twitching in agony as Jarulek pushed his hand into the cut in his abdomen, pressing into his body cavity, groping upwards.

His tongue was gone, torn from his mouth at its root. It lay on the floor, discarded. A length of chain was between his teeth, wrapped around the back of his neck like a gag. Bleeding ruinous symbols were sliced into the meat of his chest, thighs, shoulders and neck; Jarulek had made his flesh a bloody parchment for his work. An eight-pointed star had been carved into his forehead, deep enough to score it upon his skull.

‘Was it wise to tell Dorn you were on the comet?’ said Jarulek.

‘The best lies have an element of truth to them,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘He would have known if I had spoken false.’

‘Was the task complete?’

‘No,’ said Sor Talgron, bitterness tinging his words. ‘With Dorn’s return, I had to leave it unfinished. I left a contingent behind with Ibarix to complete the task.’

Jarulek paused in his bloody work, glancing up at his captain.

‘That is a death sentence,’ he said.

‘Ibarix volunteered. He will do the Legion proud, when their time comes. Now get on with it. We have been too long already.’

Jarulek nodded sagely, and focused back on the task at hand.

‘I take no pleasure in this defilement,’ Sor Talgron said to Volkhar Wreth. He was standing back, away from the bloody work, arms folded across his chest. ‘This is just a means to an end. You are just another tool in my arsenal, a weapon to be unleashed. The war will come to Terra, and the palace will fall. You’ll be a part of that.’

The Dark Apostle pulled his bloody arm from within Wreth’s torso. He held the tortured Word Bearer’s primary heart in his hand. It was still pumping, the severed arteries and veins oozing blood with each labouring convulsion. The predicant’s eyes were wide as he stared up at his own still-beating heart. His

breathing was coming in short, sharp gasps. His secondary heart would have kicked in by now – a legionary could live, for a time, like this.

'The flask,' said Jarulek.

There were two glass vessels that Jarulek had set aside before he had begun his work. One had something oily and writhing within it. The other was empty but for a measure of inky fluid. Sor Talgron unstoppered the lid of this second flask and held it out, and Jarulek slid Wreth's heart into it before sealing it shut.

'The other one,' said Jarulek, gesturing. 'Give it to me. Quickly!'

'I will not touch it,' said Sor Talgron, holding up the vessel containing Wreth's heart before him. It had stopped beating.

With a hiss, Jarulek stood and retrieved the flask himself before kneeling once more before Volkhar Wreth. The legionary's face was pallid and his eyes were unfocused. His breathing had shallowed. His body was shutting down, putting him into hibernation.

Jarulek muttered a string of un-words that made his mouth bleed and the candlelight flicker. He slammed the flask in his hand into the stone floor, and a spiderweb of cracks crazed its glass surface. Dark liquid seeped from the cracks, oily and steaming, and a stench like spoiled meat filled the air. The wriggling thing inside went wild, thrashing and undulating, pressing against its fractured prison. Jarulek still held it in his hand as pieces of glass began to fall away and worm-like appendages the colour of a bruise probed their way free.

Volkhar Wreth had now faded out of consciousness, his breathing slowing until it was barely perceptible. Jarulek leant over him, still speaking in the tongue of the daemon, blood dripping from his lips. Tainted glass fell from the shattered flask as the thing held within struggled to emerge. Sor Talgron could feel its presence, clawing at the edges of his mind as it strained to haul itself into reality. The squirming thing in the flask was but a tiny part of the creature – the rest dwelt in the roiling chaos of the warp.

'If I can feel that, others may,' he snarled. 'Control it.'

'This room is shielded,' said Jarulek. 'No one will pick up anything.'

'Just be quick about it.'

Jarulek thrust the broken flask into the gash he had carved in Volkhar Wreth's body, and pushed it up into the void where his heart had been. He pulled his hand out, and wiped away the oily residue.

Volkhar Wreth shuddered, his body convulsing. His eyes shot open, a look of unutterable horror ingrained in them. He moaned, shaking his head from side to side. He looked up at Sor Talgron, pleadingly. He was managing to gasp, though

the muscles of his neck were bulging, the veins in his temple straining fit to burst. He tried to scream, to beg, to curse them, but he could not.

Sor Talgron felt a shudder in the flask in his hand. He lifted it, wonder and disgust warring for his attention. The predicant's heart within had started beating once more.

'It's working,' said Sor Talgron.

'It is bonding with him,' said Jarulek. He was stitching up Wreth's midsection, pulling the skin tight and sewing it shut with thick thread and a jagged hook. It was crude work, and hurried, but it would suffice.

When he was done, he wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

'These wards will contain it,' he said, gesturing vaguely to the symbols carved in Wreth's flesh. 'Until the time is right.'

'And then the minds of these frozen psykers will power its release,' said Sor Talgron.

'Correct,' said Jarulek.

'As I said – if it doesn't work, I will cut your throat.'

'It will likely be some years before we know.'

'*I can wait,' said Sor Talgron. He placed a hand upon Volkhar Wreth's bloody brow. 'I'm sorry, old friend,' he said.*

Almost wilfully, a burning white-green mist fell upon one of the siege squad legionaries as the doors slid open. He staggered, steam rising from his armour, which instantly began to hiss, its surface dissolving as the phosphex began to work.

Sor Talgron and one of the other Word Bearers hauled the stricken legionary back, but the damage was done. They dumped him on the floor as his heavy plate began to blister and crack. It was his rubberised armour seals that were compromised first, but he roared as his flesh began to sizzle and burn inside his plate. The floor beneath him began to hiss as the corrosive chemical mist began to eat away at it.

Burning vapours crawled across the landing pad. The mountains were on the very edge of one of the detonations, yet even so, the carnage was devastating. Everything touched by it was being voraciously devoured. Metal dissolved as though bathed in acid, and the bare rock blazed with green fire. Even the air itself was being consumed in the choking, metallic clouds.

'Gods,' swore Loth. 'The ships.'

The Word Bearers craft were gone. The XIII Legion lighter craft was there, but

a glance assured Sor Talgron that it was not taking them anywhere – the cockpit canopy sagged inwards, liquefied by corrosive alchemical poisons, and its metal fuselage was dissolving before his eyes.

There was no way off the platform.

The fallen legionary was sinking into the floor as it sagged and melted beneath him. His screams were almost pitiful, so Sor Talgron ended him quickly with his combat blade. The flooring gave way, and the body of the Word Bearer dropped into the conveyor shaft. The corrosion in the floor was spreading.

'Out,' he ordered.

The platform was burning, but the corrosive mist had not yet consumed it. There were still pockets of safety. In the distance, alchemical flames were engulfing the mountains, flowing over them like an avalanche. They were lucky, here, he realised. The other mountains must have acted as a buffer, an aegis protecting them from the worst of the phosphex fallout, but the rising mist was coming for them at high speed. They had a matter of minutes at best.

'Dal Ahk,' snarled Sor Talgron, scanning the skies.

'The vox is still out,' said Loth.

'Get a flare up,' ordered Sor Talgron. Before the recon sergeant could comply with his captain's orders, however, they caught sight of a final missile screaming down through the upper atmosphere. It disappeared beyond the mountains, but it wasn't hard to judge that it would fall closer to them than any other had.

They didn't feel the impact underfoot – not right away. The shock wave would take some time to reach them, but when it did, it would be devastating. Nor did they hear anything at first.

There was a retina-burning flash, however. It blanketed the sky. The optic dampeners of Sor Talgron's helmet cancelled out the searing blast, saving his eyes and turning everything dark as they compensated.

In the wake of the detonation, a giant cloud of roiling dust, smoke and pale flame rose into the air, its momentum building even as it soared into the stratosphere. The fallout of that detonation roared over the tops of the mountains in a searing, burning shock wave, hurtling towards them in a wall over a dozen kilometres high. That wall obliterated the peaks from view, one after another, coming at them at colossal speed.

There was no way to outrun it. There was nothing to do but stand and watch as it howled towards them, consuming everything in its wake. It was death, and it was coming for them.

There was no way anyone would believe that one of Guilliman's sons would

sanction the use of phosphex on such a scale, particularly against one of their own worlds. Sor Talgron knew that his own Legion would be blamed for this atrocity.

'Perhaps this is what we deserve,' he muttered.

TWELVE

The wall of roiling, pale green alchemical fire crashed over them, lifting them from their feet and hurling them back.

Sor Talgron bellowed as he was smashed against the mountain with bone-shattering force. His cries were lost in the deafening roar of the poisonous inferno. He could see little, the white mist and pale flames surrounding him, though he caught glimpses of legionaries being tossed around like the playthings of cruel gods. It was like being in the grip of a fiery cyclone, though the winds were made up of the strongest corrosive chemicals ever devised by man.

Loth and his recon squad were the first to perish, their stripped-down armour the least able to resist the toxic winds. Their plate dissolved upon their flesh, consumed by a fierce, burning coldness. Skin and muscle tissue turned molten, and bones burned as meat slipped from them. Helm lenses shattered, and eyes and brains were liquefied, burned out within their skulls in an instant.

Sor Talgron felt the acidic burn as his armour seals gave way. The agony was excruciating, worse than anything he had ever experienced. His face already bore evidence of rad-scarring and nuclear burns, but the pain of those injuries was as nothing next to the horrific sensation of the phosphex melting into his flesh.

The blast wave was past them, leaving Sor Talgron and his warriors reeling, stumbling around on the melting platform, their bodies awash with choking, corrosive fire. None of them had escaped its rage. Half the legionaries were dead

already, their bodies burning fiercely on the deck. Sor Talgron's flesh was aflame, and he dropped to his knees, as the tendons, ligaments and muscles in his ankles and knees were consumed, his integrity seals finally giving way completely.

His entire body was awash with burning agony, without and within. His muscles turned to fire. Both hearts began to blaze.

His helm's grille dissolved inwards and he inhaled the burning, acidic mist, breathing it into his lungs. His visor lenses had been eaten away and his eyes melted, running down his searing cheeks.

He fell, writhing, agony searing through every nerve ending. His flesh was being broken down, eaten off his bones, flickering with pale flame. His armour was alight, being stripped back to its base constituents and devoured. The very air he breathed was poisoned fire.

He struggled to push himself upright, but it was a battle that he could not win. His will alone was not enough. He fell again, and this time he did not rise.

In his last moments, he thought of Volkhar Wreth. Better to die than to suffer that fate.

Sor Talgron and his companion, cloaked in a dark crimson robe and the hood drawn low over his face, strode down the umbilical corridor towards the waiting drop shuttle. A voice, authoritative and altered by a high-end vocabulator, called after them.

'Halt!'

The two Word Bearers slowed, and turned towards the voice.

'Problem?' breathed Jarulek from the concealing shadow of his hood. Sor Talgron knew that he would be clutching his athame beneath his robe, ready to strike. Against those that approached, it would do little.

'Maybe,' he said.

A trio of Custodians strode towards them, artery-red capes and plumes flowing out in their wake. They came to a halt before the pair of legionaries, the bases of their guardian spears ringing sharply on the deck.

'Yes?' said Sor Talgron. His hand itched for a weapon.

The faceplate of the lead Custodian slid back, revealing the stern features of Tiber Acanthus.

'You are leaving us, then,' he said.

'We are,' said Sor Talgron. 'Dorn has ordered all legionaries of the Seventeenth within the Solar System to Isstvan. We go to join the muster.'

Tiber Acanthus nodded. 'You had some delays getting here? Servitor pilot failure?'

'On the ornithopter, yes. A slight delay. An inconvenience, but nothing more.'

The Custodian's gaze lingered on the hooded and cowled figure of Jarulek.

'Was there something else that you wanted, sentinel?' said Sor Talgron, and Tiber Acanthus' attention turned back to him. His expression was severe for a moment, then broke into something only a little warmer.

'Merely to wish you well,' he said. 'It has been an honour to know you during the years you've served within the system.'

Sor Talgron removed his helm to look the Custodian in the eye. The respect he felt for the sentinel was genuine. He extended his hand, and they shook in the old warrior manner.

'Fight well,' said Acanthus. 'May we meet again.'

'I feel certain that we will,' said Sor Talgron.

The Stormbird descended, buffeted by the roiling eddies left in the wake of the detonation. It came in hard, and the writhing, cloying mists clinging to the mountains rose to meet it, reaching out with tendrils of flame.

Jet turbines rotated downwards, and the gunship roared in under the deep overhang of the landing platform. Its clawed landing gear was not extended – the platform was no longer solid – but its assault ramp lowered, opening to the roiling tumult beyond. It hovered unsteadily in the air, shuddering and reeling as the white flames licked across its chassis and began to burn.

Two figures bedecked in flaming Cataphractii armour stood awaiting it, a charred figure held between them. Half crawling, half limping, they staggered towards the gaping ramp, dragging the lifeless warrior. It was too much for the first of them – even the immense void-hardened Cataphractii suits were not able to maintain their integrity against the ravages of phosphex. He collapsed, and the last standing legionary on Percepton Primus hauled the charred body up onto the ramp alone, pushing it in before clambering up and collapsing inside.

The Stormbird's vectored engines roared. Its hull was being eaten away now where the gelid, living flames had licked at it. It pulled away, its engines rotating, turning down towards the blanket of white-green death that was consuming the land below from horizon to horizon, and it rocketed skywards, screaming back into the upper atmosphere.

Only once it reached the void was it given a reprieve from the phosphex. Extended exposure to a cold vacuum was the only way to put out those flames

once they had taken hold.

In the Stormbird's troop bay, the Terminator-armoured legionary held the burned husk of his commander as all the air within was vented into the void. Then he collapsed, finally succumbing.

'*Infidus Diabolus,* this is Stormbird AT-394, inbound on aft launch deck fourteen,' said Dal Ahk from the cockpit of the gunship. 'I need an emergency medicae crew prepped and waiting. Ready the apothecarion to treat extreme phosphex and void-sustained injuries. Priority primus.'

'There are no free medicae units, Stormbird AT-394,' came the static-infused response. *'The apothecarion is already overrun with the influx of casualties*.'

'I am bringing in Captain Sor Talgron,' Dal Ahk said, simply. There was a momentary pause, then the connection clicked to another channel. A new voice spoke then.

'Understood, Stormbird AT-394. A medicae team will be ready and waiting.'

THIRTEEN

‘Will he live?’

Urhlan glanced back to the one who had spoken; the Dark Apostle, Jarulek. He stood with arms crossed over his chest. There were a handful of other officers and legionaries clustered around the slab. All of them bore evidence of battle, and most sported wounds of varying severity.

‘I am surprised he is even alive now,’ Urhlan said, making a vain attempt to wipe the blood from his helmet’s visor lenses. ‘I was surprised that he was alive when he got here.’

‘But can you save him?’

Urhlan looked down at his patient, writhing on the slab before him.

‘No,’ he said.

‘Then his fate is in the gods’ hands,’ said Jarulek.

Urhlan turned back towards the now comatose, twitching mass of chem-melted flesh on the slab before him. It was hard to believe that this was his captain.

‘Get out,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘Let me work. I will do what I can.’

He was in the hole with Volkhar Wreth.

The predicant’s chest was closed, the shattered warp-flask sealed within him. They had dropped him into the oubliette that Jarulek had prepared, and he’d hit the bottom of the shaft hard – his useless, paralysed legs folding beneath him. The tight confines had pressed in around him, keeping him partially upright, but

he was a sorry sight, crumpled into an awkward foetal position at the bottom of the hole. Jarulek had stitched his eyes open before they'd thrown him in. It was a spiteful act, and one that Sor Talgron regretted not halting.

They had then wedged flagstones and rock down into the oubliette on top of him, the first pieces lowered carefully, the remainder hurled in haste. Many of the pieces were large, the gaps between them substantial; he wouldn't run out of air for a while, at least. Finally, they had dragged the heavy stone altar back over the hole and locked the tomb, sealing it with chains and heaped rubble.

Wreth had been awake when they had dropped him in and he lived still. The things that had replaced his heart kept him awake and compos mentis, his sus-an membrane suppressed. How many years could a mind remain crumpled in darkness, conscious but unable to move, before he went mad?

Sor Talgron would find out, now.

He was in the hole with Volkhar Wreth.

They were pressed together. The darkness was complete, but he was able to see. He didn't question why. Wreth's breathing was coming in short, sharp gasps, and it became more rapid as he sensed that Sor Talgron was so close by.

His skin was an unhealthy shade of grey, and thick purple-black veins throbbed within the meat of his body. Things were moving within his flesh; things that writhed and pulsed. He was an incubator, a host, and what was contained within wanted to come out. Sor Talgron could hear its whispering, maddening voices in his mind. It wanted to emerge through Wreth's corporeal form, to enter this realm of existence using his flesh as a gateway.

It was not yet time, though. Not yet.

What dwelt within Volkhar Wreth's flesh was but a tiny portion of its whole – the rest resided in the roiling depths of the warp, waiting, impatient and full of hatred.

'I'm sorry,' said Sor Talgron. 'This was not the way I had hoped it would be. But it is necessary. When the time comes, the palace must be breached. Anything to further that goal must be done.'

He could see Wreth's wide, blood-infused eyes staring back at him, eyelids crudely stitched open. Tears of blood and hissing ichor ran down his cheeks. There was horror writ in his gaze – he knew that something was being birthed within his flesh. He knew that his flesh was no longer his own.

'I'm dead,' said Sor Talgron. 'That's why I am here. This is my punishment.'

He reached out a hand, noting in passing that the flesh of his arm was blistered and smoking, and pressed his fingers to the roughly sutured wound on Predicant

Wreth's sternum. The skin had not healed, and he pushed his hand within.

Things squirmed in the darkness. He felt them probing at his hand and arm. Then they began to burrow into his flesh. It was not an uncomfortable sensation. The worm-like tendrils squirmed up from his forearm, up into his bicep. They made his hideously burned flesh ripple and flex.

They wriggled and burrowed further in, up through his shoulder and then deeper into his body, digging around in his organs. One pressed itself up through his neck, making his throat bulge, then up through the base of his skull, and burrowed into his brain. He felt the pressure of it against his mind. He smiled and a chuckle escaped his lips at the strange sensation. He saw fear and loathing in Wreth's unblinking eyes.

Then the tendrils began to retract, and Sor Talgron's smile was replaced with sudden panic. The daemonic protuberances had rooted themselves in his flesh, hooking into him, and they would not release their hold.

He fought against them, but he could not escape their grip. They had bonded with him, and were as much a part of him as his bones and muscles now. They retracted back within their host – it was not time to emerge, not yet – and Sor Talgron was dragged with them. He roared and screamed and shouted, fighting them the whole way, but was pulled inexorably in.

His hand was still within Volkhar Wreth's body. It was impossible now to pull it free. In the space of a breath, he was pulled in up to his shoulder. He could do nothing to forestall it. Logically, it made no sense, but then the predicant's mortal shell being host to a daemon, the majority of which dwelt beyond the veil, was not logical either.

He felt the knives and bone saws cutting into his tortured flesh, true, but it was a distant thing, as though it might be happening to someone else. He saw what was left of his arms and legs hacked from his torso, his limbs having suffered too much trauma and damage from the phosphex flames. There was nothing left to salvage.

His hearts were melted, useless things, and they were replaced with synthetic modules that whirred and clicked. His lungs were gone. A humming machine was doing his breathing for him.

'Brain activity is spiking,' *he heard a voice say. It was muffled, like he was underwater.* 'We're losing him again!'

Sor Talgron strained against the force pulling him into the body of Volkhar Wreth, but it was too strong. His world disappeared as his whole body was pulled within that infested torso. He was hauled down and down and down, into

the deeper darkness that lurked below.

He was dragged down still further, and the darkness gave way to a liquid, milky red. He was gone from the material plane and out into the roiling nightmare of the warp, and he felt monstrous eyes turn towards him, felt the pressing intellect of unattainable sentience there, felt the presence of the gods and daemons that he had always denied; beings that had been old long before man had come down from the trees and turned into the petty creatures that they had become. He was being strangled in the bosom of hell, engulfed by the tentacles of beings the mortal mind was unable to fathom. He felt the crushing weight of their attention upon him and he screamed, his lungs filling with liquid fire.

He struggled to free himself, to swim clear of this sickening, maddening morass of hatred and fury and rage, but he could not. This was his prison and his damnation, and what was worse was that it was one he felt he deserved.

Darkness closed around him. It was all but complete, when a golden radiance appeared before him. He looked up into the face of a demigod hovering before him, and he felt the strangling tentacles fall away.

My son.

It extended a hand out towards him, light spilling from every pore. He reached up and took the mighty being's golden hand. The demigod's fingers closed around his own and golden light infused everything.

'That's it,' *said a voice.* 'It's over. He's gone.'

The bloody, limbless thing on the table that had once been Sor Talgron was dead. It was actually the eighth time that he had died on the slab, but this time they had been unable to revive him.

Apothecary Urhlan stepped away, unplugging the machines that had been straining to keep the captain alive. Their beeps and whirrs became a single, uninterrupted whine. He was covered in blood. It dripped off his arms and chest in thick rivulets.

'It was always unlikely that he'd survive,' he said to the assembled legionaries, who had returned to check on their comrades. He glanced nearby, where another legionary lay unconscious, his flesh pierced by dozens of cables and tubes. 'That one is doing better, though. The one who brought him in. Who is he?'

'Cataphractii Sergeant Kol Badar,' said Dal Ahk in a hollow voice. He was staring dead-eyed at the fleshy ruin that had been Sor Talgron. 'I thought I'd saved him.'

The master of signal turned and walked away, head down.

One by one, the other legionaries drifted away until Jarulek was alone. The Dark Apostle stepped in close, staring down at Sor Talgron's melted face. He saw something twitch.

He blinked, thinking he'd imagined it, but then he saw it again. An exposed ligament twitched in the right side of Sor Talgron's face. Looking closer, he thought he saw something moving within the captain's ravaged flesh, just for a fraction of a second…

He felt the touch of the warp, then. It was seeping off the corpse of Sor Talgron like an odour, and his eyes widened in wonder. Sor Talgron twisted on the slab, and his jaw opened, working silently. A beatific smile broke across his lipless mouth.

'Apothecary!' Jarulek shouted. 'He's alive!'

Sor Talgron turned his mutilated face towards Jarulek, his empty, bloodied eye sockets locking unerringly onto him.

'The Urizen,' Sor Talgron croaked.

Jarulek dropped to his knees. 'What of him, brother?'

'He… He lifted me from the darkness.'

'Apothecary!' Jarulek shouted over his shoulder again.

'I saw them, Jarulek,' Sor Talgron whispered.

'Saw who, my lord?'

'The gods…' he breathed.

EPILOGUE

The angled prow of the ship cleaved through the living anti-matter of the hellscape visible beyond the oculus portal. Beings of raw emotion, manifested in forms drawn from the nightmares and horror-filled psyches of mortals, scratched upon the ship's Geller field, straining to breach it.

Sor Talgron stood upon the bridge of his hulking capital ship, staring out into the churning madness of the warp.

They had not interred him within the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought after the shocking injuries he had sustained on Percepton Primus. No, instead they built a new body for him – one of bionics, pistons, gears and synthetic organs. Almost nothing remained of his former self.

His face was a tortured horror of mutilated flesh and malformed scar tissue. They wanted to gift him a new one. Vat-grown synth-flesh, cultured muscle tissue and harvested living bone. He had laughed at the suggestion.

His eyes had been replaced, however, and he stared out into the empyrean with a pair of black orbs, eyes manufactured by adepts of the Mechanicum and enhanced by his own prayers, exhortations and dark blessings. Attuned to the warp and its variances, they gave him a unique perspective that he found pleasing.

He was taller than he had been in the first incarnation of his life, that empty existence he'd experienced before he had come to his faith. There was no way of separating where his armour and flesh became one.

The Book of Lorgar was affixed to his breastplate, open to display litanies and catechisms of defilement. At his hip hung his helmet, newly fashioned in the likeness of a leering skull.

He had been reborn anew upon the apothecarion deck of the *Infidus Diabolus*. A fresh purpose drove him, a new conviction. A path had opened before him. A new way.

The staff of his newly attained office hung across his back. It was a potent weapon as well as his staff of office: a giant crozius, tempered in the blood of martyrs.

He had lost fully two-thirds of the 34th Company on Percepton Primus when the Ultramarines purged the world. It was a staggering final act by a beaten foe. Percepton Primus was forever tainted, but that, Sor Talgron judged, was a small loss for the toll the Ultramarines had inflicted.

He had lost much on Percepton Primus. But he had gained much, as well.

Clarity. Purpose. Belief. Faith.

At his hip, a warp flask throbbed. A heart beat within it – the heart of Volkhar Wreth.

'Soon, my old friend,' he said.

THE SIGILLITE

Chris Wraight

Khalid Hassan sat in the antechamber, trying not to sweat, trying not to allow his hands to shake, trying to not do anything that would bring any more dishonour to his rank and regiment. He forced himself to remain still, his back against the polished marble wall. His palms pressed down onto the fabric of his ceremonial dress trousers. The high, stiff collar prickled at his neck, irritating his freshly shaved skin.

He felt ludicrous – cleaned and trimmed and starched, like a living meal to be served in some unholy banquet.

He drew in deep, regular breaths.

'This is absurd,' he muttered. 'I was not wound this tight on the mission itself.'

He forced himself to go through the motions, to assess the current scenario, to run through the options.

'Keep it together.'

The antechamber was large, just one of a series of opulent rooms he'd passed through in sequence. He had been accompanied inside by a man in a black shift and velvet shoes who had padded silently like a cat. The man had said nothing, just stared at Hassan with inscrutable, heavy-lidded eyes. He'd left him alone in the final room with a slight bow, withdrawing as sleekly as he'd arrived, closing two bronze-panelled doors with a quiet click of locks. Another pair of identical doors stood shut on the facing wall.

According to the gold-chased chrono on the mantelpiece opposite, Hassan had sat alone for seven minutes. It had felt more like an eternity.

At least the surroundings were comfortable. The air was cool and clear, filtered through shuttered windows. Hassan could hear the languid gurgle of a fountain

in the courtyard outside. A low table stood in the centre, upon which rested a silver ewer, a towel and a single cut crystal glass that glinted in the soft light.

Hassan had not touched it. He had sat in the same starched position since being shown to his place by the feline steward. He had watched the play of sunlight through the shutters, smelled the floral aroma of the wood and the fabrics, listened to the quiet play of the fountain.

He had seen it. Even if this was the last thing he saw, he had still seen it. How many men could say the same?

He had seen the vision of the immortal Emperor, the handiwork of a thousand architects, the defensive masterpiece of the primarch Rogal Dorn. Viewed from the incoming lander it had been astonishing, magnificent – a sprawling fantasy of stone, adamantium, granite and gold. Defence towers jostled with observatories and terraced gardens; missile batteries and slotted bunkers thrust up tightly amid pillared libraries; burnished monuments to the pride and ambition of mankind, all picked out under the azure sky of the Himalazian peaks.

Now, lost in the heart of its vastness, listening to the calming trickle of water, he could run through the events of the past few days.

Captain Khalid Hassan of the Fourth Clandestine Orta, the most decorated of the serving officers of his regiment, a man who had loved his work so completely that he had had no life and no family outside of it, contemplated, with a certain fatality, the failure that had brought him to the Imperial Palace.

The air was hot and thick with dust. His armour – black carapace plates, full-face helm with opaque visor and rebreather tubes, environment spine-pack with internal pressure control – was coated with it. His filters were losing efficiency, and he could hear the echo of his own heavy breathing in his earpiece.

Ahead of him, blurry through night vision, he could see the compound rearing up into the dust-thick darkness. It was ugly, squat, heavy – a defensible bastion in the Gyptian style. A few lights blinked and flickered in the gloom; otherwise, it was shadowy and sullen, surrounded by a solid perimeter wall broad enough for men to walk upon it in pairs.

Hassan lay low, feeling the hardscrabble of the desert fringes press into his armour. He rested his elbows on the ridge before him. Tiny magnocular lenses slipped down the inside curve of his helm visor and whirred into focus. He moved his head fractionally, sweeping across the walls. Each visible detail was recorded and cross-referenced with the internal schematic held in his suit's

cogitator core.

Las-turret, two metres out of position. Corrected. Sentries visible, moving along perimeter boundary. They haven't seen us.

He suppressed a smile.

And they won't.

He heard Farouk squirm up alongside him, his body low and pressed into the dust.

'Just say the word, captain,' said Farouk.

'Everyone in position?' asked Hassan, completing the sweep.

'All ready to go.'

Hassan uploaded the revised tactical overlays to the squad. Fifteen acknowledgement sigils scrolled down his helm display. He switched to an overhead schematic showing the positions of his men – they were located around the perimeter in five-man squads, each still in cover. Two of the three teams were on the far side of the compound from Hassan's position, poised to attack the air defence tower and the atmospheric shield generators. Their sensor-resistant armour would keep all of them hidden. Until they broke inside, they would be all but invisible.

'So what are we doing here, captain?' asked Farouk.

Hassan smiled dryly. 'Now? You ask me now?'

'You're not going to tell me.'

Hassan shook his head. 'You know how it is.'

All of them knew how it was. That was the point of the Clandestine brigades: restricted orders, special taskings, operations outside the Imperial chain of command. Farouk chafed at it the most, but then he'd come from a regular Army regiment and was used to a less furtive way of war.

As for this mission, Hassan knew little enough himself. The orders had been shunted into the regiment core six days ago under heavy security cover. His men had re-routed from a routine sweep of the Collovis Hives. Ever since the insurrection had begun, subversive activity had been endemic in the bigger population hubs. Hassan had even heard chatter over the grid about rogue legionaries staging a prison break. He didn't believe that one. There were always fanciful stories about those armour-clad superhumans; more, since the news of the Warmaster's madness had filtered out.

In any case, Hassan didn't place much faith in the Space Marines. They had a reputation, sure, but he doubted half of what was said about them could be true. The Imperium had been built by *mortal* men and woman, billions upon billions

of them, toiling towards a future free from the horrors of Old Night. Genhanced monsters had no place there – they were brutal, clumsy tools and their time would pass.

Which left the way clear for more subtle weapons.

He checked his chronometer.

'Move,' he ordered across the vox.

Still out of visual range, all he saw of the two other teams were their marker runes moving silently across his visor display.

Farouk stayed motionless. Behind him, the rest of his own squad remained in cover.

Hassan felt his pulse quicken as he counted down the seconds.

'Let's go.'

He pushed himself up, keeping his body low as he jogged out into the open. He heard the soft footfalls of his men close behind him. They broke clear of the ridge and swept across the open ground leading to the walls.

As they ran, the earth was suddenly rocked by a series of hard, sharp explosions from the far side of the compound. The night sky flared up, red and angry. Arc-lights burst into life, joined by the strained blare of intruder alarms.

The sentries on the wall ahead of them disappeared from the parapet edges, drawn by the detonations at the opposite edge of the facility.

Hassan reached the base of the wall and prepared the grapnels.

'Too easy,' said Farouk, joining him and taking aim.

'So far,' agreed Hassan, squinting as he pulled the trigger. The rope sailed up, clamping fast and pulling tight, and he began to climb.

Soon all five of them had reached the summit and they swung over the lip of the parapet. They took up their weapons – projectile rifles, as sleek, black and finely tooled as everything they carried. By the time the sentries spotted them it was too late – precise kill-shots flashed in the night.

More explosions rang out from the compound below. A shower of yellow sparks erupted in the distance, making the air smell briefly sulphurous.

'First generator's out,' remarked Farouk.

Hassan grunted. Farouk was a good soldier, but his tactical commentaries quickly grew tiresome. 'Let's just concentrate on our tasking, shall we?' he said.

'Whatever you say.'

The expanse of the compound spread out below – a loose collection of hangars and rockcrete bunkers, all of which were ugly, dark and scoured by wind-driven sand. Fires had broken out amongst those on the far edge, sparked by the

incendiaries planted by the two other teams. Hassan could see the silhouettes of guards crossing the open spaces, their movements hurried and ill-directed. They were still trying to reinforce the northern wall, over where the evidence of infiltration had been made most obvious.

So far, so good.

'That's the target,' said Hassan, moving along the parapet and gesturing to one of the bunkers below. It was a nondescript building, just one of a dozen that were of a similar size and shape.

'Ugly thing,' observed Farouk.

'It'll be uglier in a minute,' said Hassan. 'Keep it quiet.'

One by one they rappelled to the ground. They kept low, running semi-hunched. Three more guards fell before they reached their destination, dropped by single rounds. When they reached the shelter of the bunker entrance they crouched down, as inconspicuous as shadows.

The bunker's blast doors were sealed and barred. Hassan clamped six hyperacid capsules along the join, then retreated and blew the charges. The thick metal doors dissolved in a steaming, foaming cloud. Hassan heard a cluster of short-lived screams as the guards on the other side inhaled the toxic mix of dissolving plasteel and airborne chem-droplets – otherwise, the breach was almost silent, masked by the continuing explosions and gunfire running along the northern wall.

All that remained afterwards was a steaming, jagged void, its steel edges melted into stretched teardrops.

Hassan got to his feet. The bunker interior beckoned, ink-black and smelling of molten flesh and metal.

'Now we enter,' he said, and slipped inside.

'Now you enter,' came the voice, as soft and sibilant as he'd imagined it would be.

Hassan stirred out of his memories. He couldn't see the speaker. He guessed it was the same man who'd shown him into the antechamber.

He looked up, seeing that the second set of doors had opened. He hadn't noticed them unlock; the mechanism must have been extraordinarily smooth.

He rose awkwardly. He could feel patches of sweat under his arms and around his collar, and hoped they didn't show. His limbs felt stiff, as though he'd forgotten how to walk and needed reminding.

Once through the doors, he passed into a vast sunlit chamber. One entire wall

was given over to a long unbroken expanse of glass. Circling mountains broke up the horizon beyond, glittering white in the sunlight.

The floor was polished parquet. Eclectic items of furniture dotted the cavernous interior – a Louis Canz armoire stood next to a Unity-era 'lith projector, overlooked by a series of Hjuort oils and a cabinet containing priceless Ming and Wejwood ceramics.

It reminded him of a magpie's nest. A collector's den. Ostentatious, given the circumstances.

Hassan was alone. The room was silent. The doors closed behind him, moving together as quietly and elegantly as they had opened.

For a moment he stood still, listening to the sound of his own breathing, wondering if the things he saw around him were even real. *Perhaps this was a test.* Perhaps he was being shown one final glimpse of glory before the end.

Hassan knew they could have pronounced their judgement at any time. He had already given them all the information he could. He had been most careful about it, making sure the details were correct. Even in his failure he had not stinted nor tried to excuse himself. That had always been his way: honesty, even in disgrace. Such, of course, were the values of the Imperium, the basis upon which his loyalty had always been commanded.

Time passed. No one else entered the room. Hassan began to lose his sense of slow foreboding. He walked over to the windows, standing close to the glass and resting his fingertips against it.

The vista spread out before him – a dizzying sweep across the Palace's western marches.

So much gold. So much of everything.

Vertiginous battlements plunged like cataracts into thickets of bone-thin towers. Colossal buttresses soared up from the bones of the mountains, massive and eternal. Even Lord Dorn's heavy alterations along the outer walls hadn't obliterated all of the Palace's old and innate beauty.

Gazing over such vastness, it was hard not to feel strangely insignificant. The walls had already stood for centuries. They would endure for centuries more – a beacon of splendour amidst an expanding empire of mortal exaltation.

'I liked it better before Rogal really got to work.'

The voice came out of nowhere. Hassan spun around, scanning across the chamber.

He was still alone. The voice seemed to rise from the air around him, echoing from the panels and sinking into the fabric of the woven rugs.

It was a strange voice. Mournful in tone, rich in timbre, cracked by age.

'I do not see you, lord,' replied Hassan, feeling stiff and stupid.

'No, not yet. I cannot be in all places at once. We may save some time this way. Does it unsettle you?'

Of course it did.

'Not at all.'

'Good. Then keep looking at the view. Remember it. With every passing day it will get a little uglier, a little more worn. Just like us, eh?'

Hassan turned back to the window. He wondered whether the speaker could see him. He assumed that he could, though one could never be sure. Throwing a voice was trivially easy. Such theatrics, as he well knew, were all part of the process.

'You are not a man given to levity,' came the voice again. '*That is what the reports all say – serious-minded, diligent. I can sense that in you myself. You are the embodiment of everything the Emperor aspires to instil in humanity. He would admire you, I think, were He here with us.'*

The voice did not sound disdainful. Hassan could hear harshness in it, a harshness bred from long ages of wearying command, but also other things – a grain of sympathy, mostly resignation.

It was all so very unexpected.

'I have always endeavoured to serve,' he said.

'I know you have,' came the voice. *'I know you have. But now you are here, with me, in this place. What you have been in the past, what you have done in the past, this is the reckoning for it. Do you know who I am, Captain Khalid Hassan?'*

'I think so, lord.'

'I am the reckoner. I am the judge. I am the scrivener of the Imperium, the evaluator of its ocean of souls.'

Hassan couldn't decide why he was being told this. Boastfulness? Possibly. It didn't sound like boastfulness, though. It sounded almost like sarcasm – a dry, self-aware sarcasm.

'I am the Sigillite. I am the Regent of Terra. At my command the fate of a million worlds is determined. And yet here I am, conversing with you as you look through my window and disapprove of my collections. Life is full of surprises, is it not?'

Hassan almost found himself nodding in agreement. 'It is, lord,' he said.

'And you know why you are here?'

‘Because of what happened in Gyptus.’

‘That is right,’ came the voice. *‘Think back, Khalid. Think back to what you did there. I will be with you soon – when I come, I will wish to know everything.’*

The lights had blown. Hassan blink-adjusted the gain on his helm’s night vision and progressed cautiously.

The bunker extended deep below ground level. A central corridor ran down the length of it – about fifty metres – from which smaller chambers branched off, each sealed by fresh sets of locked doors.

‘Getting anything?’ whispered Farouk over the comm. ‘No life signs here.’

‘Not yet,’ said Hassan, continuing ahead.

The squad inched down the central corridor. Hassan heard nothing but the dim sounds of battle from outside. The other squads were doing a good job of drawing attention away, but they only had a short time in which to operate.

He activated the proximity beacon on his palm-mounted auspex and saw, with some relief, the target locator rune flicker into being.

‘Third on the right,’ he said softly, motioning to a pair of slide-doors some thirty metres ahead.

Two of his troops remained in the bunker entrance, sunk in shadow, their weapons aimed to take out any intruders. Hassan, Farouk and the third operative slunk down the corridor. As Hassan edged forwards he caught a faint hiss, like machine static.

He paused. ‘You getting that?’ he asked.

Farouk looked at him. ‘Getting what?’

‘Nothing,’ said Hassan, pressing on. ‘Sensor glitch.’

They reached the chamber. It was locked and barred, just like the others.

‘Stand back,’ ordered Hassan, drawing fresh hyperacid capsules from his belt.

As he moved, he heard a dull thud, followed by a whoosh of stale air. He threw himself around, his gun held one-handed.

‘What in–’ he began, before seeing the motionless form of his squad-mate on the floor.

‘Target!’ shouted Farouk, opening fire with his rifle. A juddering hail of ice-bright bullets sprayed down the corridor, chinking and splintering from the metal walls.

Hassan joined in, firing into the darkness. The confined space erupted into a storm of gunshots.

‘Ceasefire!’ shouted Hassan.

The last echoes of the volley died. The bunker sank back into darkness. Wisps of smoke rose up from the ravaged floor.

Farouk slammed a fresh magazine into his rifle.

‘What was it?’ demanded Hassan, still seeing nothing on his proximity scan.

‘No idea,’ muttered Farouk. ‘Never got a proper look.’

Hassan glanced down at the downed operative’s body. A single slash had torn clean through his throat. Blood beneath him, thick and dark.

‘Captain?’ came an inquiry from the soldiers stationed at the entrance.

‘Stand by,’ ordered Hassan. ‘Hold position.’

His mind began to race, wondering how anything could have got so close without registering on his sensors. He reached up to his helm and depressed the release catch. ‘Remove your visor.’

‘What?’ asked Farouk, sounding tense. ‘That’s madness.’

‘Do it.’

Hassan’s helm slid open with a smooth hiss. He felt the hot, dusty air brush against his face. Deprived of his false-colour night vision everything was black. He still saw no sign of the thing that had attacked them. He felt vulnerable – nearly blind, stuck underground with something he couldn’t detect.

He heard Farouk’s visor open.

‘Great,’ said Farouk. ‘Now we’re blind.’

‘When all else fails,’ said Hassan, reaching for a low-burn flare and keying it for ignition, ‘use the eyes you were born with.’

He hurled the flare down the long corridor, hearing it bounce from the walls. The torch exploded into life, throwing a dull red bloom across the surfaces around it. In the brief burn-time, Hassan saw something dark and hunched about ten metres further down, pressed tight against the far wall. It was man-shaped and wearing some kind of sensor-reflective armour, veined with silver wires and nodes.

As soon as the flare went off, the figure leapt from the wall and tore towards them.

‘*Now* shoot!’ ordered Hassan.

The enemy bounded towards them, darting between the spitting lines of fire with uncanny speed. Farouk winged it, blasting through the armour on the left shoulder, but it kept coming.

‘Bring him down!’ shouted Hassan, falling back as he fired, aiming for the figure’s shifting outline.

Farouk screamed. Hassan saw steel talons flash in the darkness, ripping

Farouk's protective carapace as though it were made of paper.

'Farouk!' he shouted, swinging back in close, feeling his gun click empty.

The enemy stared right at him then, just for an instant, the masked face caught in the jagged flashes of muzzle discharge. Hassan saw red-rimmed eyes, dilated from combat-stimms, shot deep in stretched skin.

He thrust the hyperacid capsule – still clutched in his left fist – into the man's face, smashing it open before throwing himself clear.

The screams were unholy, a cacophony of animal shrieks and gurgling, throttled agony. The smell of charred flesh filled the corridor, accompanied by bloody splatters as the acid ate down to the man's arteries.

Hassan scrabbled away, grabbing hold of Farouk's reeling body and hauling it clear. The enemy staggered away from them, clutching at his disintegrating face. Then he collapsed, twitching, his savaged head and neck steaming and popping.

Hassan got back to his knees, breathing heavily. The two operatives he'd left at the doors reached his position. They stared down at the twisted body of the enemy warrior, then at Farouk.

Farouk coughed, spraying blood against Hassan's armour.

'How bad?' demanded Hassan, flipping his visor closed.

'Significant,' croaked Farouk.

Hassan felt the heavy weight of Farouk's body in his arms. He wouldn't do much more fighting.

'We're almost done,' he said, lowering him carefully to the ground and moving over to the sealed doors. 'Then we're on our way out.'

Hassan primed a charge, clamped it and withdrew. The four of them shuffled back away from the doors, and the krak grenade went off with a sharp, focused report, blasting a jagged hole in the metal.

'That'll bring them running,' Hassan said grimly, getting to his feet and heading for the broken entrance, reloading as he went. 'Now let's retrieve the target and get out before they catch us.'

Hassan didn't notice the Sigillite enter the room. One moment he was alone, the next he was staring directly at a cowled old man clutching a staff.

He collected himself.

'Forgive me for keeping you waiting, captain,' said the old man. 'Lord Dorn is well-meaning but has never mastered brevity.'

Hassan clasped his hands behind his back and stood straight. He could feel his pulse picking up, throbbing through the veins at his neck. Something about the

man before him put him on edge. He felt an unaccountable urge to look away.

The Sigillite was slight. His stoop made him short, and his hands gripped his flickering staff as though for support. For all the man's frailty, Hassan could sense the quiet power radiating from him, as deep and cold as a well-shaft.

He does not hide it. He could destroy everything around us with a gesture.

The Sigillite reached a bony hand up to his hood and pushed the fabric back. An old, old face emerged, deep-lined and ember-dry. Bones jutted under drawn flesh, stark like the profile of famishment. But his eyes were alive – deep, darting eyes that moved with an almost avian sharpness.

Those eyes held Hassan for a moment. He felt his mouth go dry.

Then the Sigillite released him. He walked over to a low couch and lowered himself down. His movements were halting, like one who had once been trained to the peak of physical perfection but had since been terribly wounded. It was a strangely affecting sight.

Malcador leaned back. His grey face smoothed by a fraction; his clenched features relaxed. He put the staff aside and his withered hands rested on his bony lap.

'Sit.'

Hassan did as he was told, moving over to a leather armchair facing the couch. He felt his hands trembling.

'Will you drink?' asked Malcador, glancing at a carafe on the table between them. As soon as he mentioned it, Hassan felt a thirst kindle at the back of his throat.

'No, thank you.'

Malcador poured himself a glass of what looked like wine. He brought the glass up to his hooked nose and let the aroma linger for a moment.

'I remember when there were vines in Franc,' he said. He took a sip, swirled it in his mouth, and swallowed. 'So much easier now. It even tastes as good. Or does it? How would we know? Who now lives who walked the vineyards of old?'

He pursed his thin lips, pensive.

'Some of us remember,' he said. Then his eyes snapped up, as unwavering as a raptor's. 'What were you doing in Gyptus?'

Hassan swallowed. 'Clandestine mission, lord. Orders received from the Palace, maximum secrecy, military priority. We were given coordinates, times, access to an Army lifter. Then we left.'

'Was that all?'

‘I’d been given the location of a single bunker.’ Hassan paused. ‘I checked it, just as always. Right until the end, I thought we’d got it right.’

Malcador nodded. ‘Right until the end.’

Hassan felt his cheeks flush. The humiliation of it had still not left him. ‘Perhaps, if we’d known what we were looking for…’ he began, then trailed off.

‘But that would have defeated the point, would it not?’ said Malcador. ‘Knowledge is dangerous in your profession. It is dangerous in all professions. If it were up to me, knowledge would be strictly rationed. It would be doled out only to those capable of handling it – a dozen souls, no more. An infinite empire can be run by twelve good men, if only they remain true to their calling.’ His expression darkened. ‘Though that can never be guaranteed, can it? Even the strongest have their flaws. Such is the tragedy of our species.’

Hassan tried to listen, to keep up. Malcador’s mind seemed to roam freely, passing from matters at hand to far-off issues of galactic governance. Hassan began to wonder if the old man were entirely sane.

Unexpectedly, the Sigillite smiled then. Like all his gestures, it was a compromised movement, at once bitter and mirthful.

‘The Emperor and I have a debate,’ he said. ‘It has been running for a long time, and I miss our discussions now that He is gone. Such a powerful intellect. Blunt, but powerful. And, very occasionally, even a sense of humour – of a sort. Would you credit that?’

Hassan listened cautiously. He didn’t understand what Malcador meant when he said the Emperor was ‘gone’. He was not. Surely, He was not. Where would He have gone to? Hassan wanted to ask, but Malcador kept on talking, just as if the absence of the Master of Mankind from the eternal seat of power were a trivial thing, hardly worth lingering over.

‘This is our debate – He believes that the task of a ruler is to make himself obsolete, so that his people will replace him when they are mature enough. I disagree. I do not think we will ever be mature enough for that. I believe that no one but He will ever be strong enough to hold mankind together, even for a moment. He is quite exceptional, you know, perhaps in ways He doesn’t even understand Himself.’

Malcador looked sidelong at Hassan. His gaze was shrewd. ‘So what do you think, Khalid? Whom would you side with, Him or me?’

Hassan took a deep breath. He didn’t know whether to be flattered to be asked, or insulted.

‘Do not hesitate,’ warned the Sigillite. ‘Choose.’

‘I was going to say…’ began Hassan, haltingly. ‘I was going to say that the Emperor will lead us forever. That is what we are taught. What I believe.’

Malcador nodded. ‘Well said. You are with me, then. And you are right, of course – He has such high aspirations for our species. Too high, perhaps, for He does not always appreciate His indispensability. But will He be around forever? That is the great question. That is the current test.’

The Sigillite brought his hands together, linking his fingertips. He seemed distracted.

‘The war for the throne has already started,’ he said. ‘Even now I feel the eye of the Arch-traitor upon us, pressing against my mind like a cancer. I hear the voices of his brothers, fawning over him, plotting with him and against him. I remember how they were, each of them, in conception and in reality. I see them as they are now, and the withering of their souls pains my heart. They have unleashed forces they cannot control. They have been lied to, and not only by the enemy. It breaks me to witness it.’

Hassan didn’t know whether to keep listening. It suddenly felt like he was intruding into some private grief.

‘Do you know,’ murmured the Sigillite, ‘out of them all, if I could have saved just one, it would have been Lorgar? Even though he despises me, and even though I was… wounded by him. He was such a fragile soul, so subtle and ready to bruise. We might have handled him better. Did we make mistakes with some of them? Surely, we did. Though I fear the time to correct them has now long passed.’

Hassan watched, he waited. Little of what the Sigillite said made sense to him. He wondered if that was part of the ordeal or some convoluted means to catching him out. If so, it seemed so contrived, so unnecessary. Crueller than it needed to be.

The Sigillite looked up at him, a tolerant expression on his face. ‘I can feel your mind wandering. You think these things have little to do with you. You are wrong. They have *everything* to do with you. They have everything to do with all of us.’

Hassan felt impatience rise within him. He wanted to be dutiful, but had no idea what his duty demanded.

‘I do not know why I am here, lord,’ he confessed.

‘Not yet,’ said Malcador, nodding. ‘But you will.’ He pulled himself to his feet again, hauling his staff into line. ‘Follow me.’

Hassan rose. ‘Where are we going?’

Malcador paused for a moment. ‘To the catacombs,’ he said. ‘Where all this started. Prepare yourself – it’s a long way down.’

It wasn’t a long way down. Hassan leapt through the gap, landing hard on a dirty rockcrete floor a metre below the shattered doorway. He swept his rifle around the space, ready to fire. As he did so, he heard the thud and gasp of Farouk landing beside him.

‘You’re up to this?’ he asked, surprised.

Farouk grunted. ‘You and me, just as always. Let’s get it done.’

The chamber was small – less than ten metres across, with a low ceiling and walls cut crudely from stone blocks. It was deserted, and smelled as musty as a tomb.

Only one item stood in the centre of the room: a cargo transit crate made of ribbed adamantium and bolted to an iron pallet. It wasn’t particularly large – two metres long, a metre tall and wide – but it was shielded by an energy field that made the air hum and sent lurid light dancing across the chamber.

‘Signals closing,’ reported Farouk.

‘How long have we got?’ asked Hassan, stowing his weapon and approaching the casket.

‘A minute. No more.’

Hassan shook his head. Not much time to work. ‘They’re quick to recover. Damn them.’

He retrieved four disruptor beacons from his armour cache and placed them carefully, one at each corner of the casket. Then he stood back, checking the alignment carefully before activating the interference wave.

The air seemed to shudder in front of him, rippling like broken water. He felt his stomach lurch uncomfortably. The energy field resisted for a moment, crackling and flexing, before giving out with a hard snap.

Hassan moved over to the crate and attached anti-grav plates, four to each side. The plates clamped on tight and flickered into life, blinking red in the shadows.

‘Air defences down yet?’ he asked as he worked, relying on Farouk to get updates from the other two squads.

‘Affirmative,’ said Farouk.

‘And site shielding?’ Hassan asked, fixing the final plate.

‘All down. Lifter’s clear to approach.’

Hassan glanced at his chronometer. It would still be close. ‘Call it in, then,’ he ordered.

He activated the anti-grav plates. The transit crate broke its shackles and rose from the ground, hovering at knee-height. It was heavy, and Hassan heard the labouring whine of the repulsor fields as they struggled to keep it aloft.

Farouk limped ahead, pulling himself awkwardly back up through the breach. Two pairs of hands reached down to drag the crate through the gap. It rose upwards shakily, buoyed by the plates, and Hassan followed it.

Once regrouped in the corridor, the four of them moved quickly back through the bunker – Hassan leading, Farouk bringing up the rear and breathing heavily. The crate went between them, humming and growling like a surly bovine.

Hassan regarded the thick-plated cover. The container was the kind used in the holds of void-going craft – heavy, banded, designed to resist hard impacts.

'It's a weapon,' said Farouk, reading his mind.

'What did you expect?' replied Hassan, pushing the pace. 'We're at war.'

'They were trying to get it off-world. Must be worth something. We get out with this, and someone's going to be very upset indeed.'

Hassan smiled, despite himself.

'Keep your eyes locked on it,' he said. 'This casing gets hit, and Throne knows what'll happen.'

They drew close to the acid-burned entrance.

'We're going to have to fight our way out, captain,' said Farouk, looking over the auspex readings a final time.

'Expected nothing less,' Hassan replied calmly, checking the ammo counter on his weapon. He watched the familiar target locators swim across his helm display. 'Pick your targets, and watch for the lifter.'

The four of them emerged from the melted blast doors and hunkered down in the wreckage. Hassan rested his gun barrel on a jutting spar of plasteel. The casket hovered alongside him, barely protected.

By now the whole compound was burning, lit up vividly by raging fires on all sides. Palls of thick smoke rose from the destroyed shield generator and anti-aircraft turrets. As Hassan swept his eyes across the scene, he could see members of the other two squads fighting their way to his position.

The sharp ping and snap of las-blasts cut up the ground around him – the enemy troops beginning to find their range. Hassan cursed, opening up in return fire, pressing his body closer to the bunker's edge.

'So then,' murmured Farouk, aiming his rifle. 'Where is it?'

Before Hassan could reply he heard the rumbling echo of heavy engines. The dust around him began to swirl, and he heard enemy troops on the walls shouting

panicked warnings to one another.

'Right on time,' he said.

A second later, and the blocky silhouette of the Army lifter swept across the perimeter, churning up more smoke and sending it billowing away. Wing-mounted guns opened fire, sweeping the exposed parapets clear of the remaining sentries and blasting the rockcrete edges into flying shards.

'Go, go, go!' roared Hassan, breaking clear of the bunker wreckage. Farouk staggered along with him, as did the hovering transit crate. The other squads leapt from cover and raced across the compound floor.

The lifter swung low over the ground, its four angled engines hammering the earth beneath them on a carpet of driving thrust. The main hatch swung down with a hiss of pistons, exposing a red-lit crew compartment within.

The guards responded, aiming their fire upwards at the hovering craft. Their las-blasts fizzed against the armour plates, some of them biting. The lifter rocked drunkenly, buffeted by the rain of small-arms fire, holding position only with difficulty.

'Faster!' shouted Hassan, watching his men sprint towards the waiting ramp.

He was last to make it, hauling the transit crate behind him, dragging it into the maw of the waiting cargo bay.

'We're taking hits,' warned Farouk, wincing as he strapped himself in. His armour was still damp with blood.

'Take us up!' Hassan called over the vox to the lifter's pilot, slamming home the last of the docking clamps.

The engines mounted in a crescendo of downdraught, pulling the gunship away and bearing it aloft. The embarkation ramp swung closed, sealing them in. Muffled noises of gunfire faded away, replaced by the dull thunder of the thrusters switching alignment. Hassan felt the lifter gathering speed, powering upwards and veering into the trajectory that would take it away from Gyptus and out of danger.

He leaned back against the walls of the crew compartment, breathing heavily. For a moment he did nothing else.

He looked around. Out of the original three squads, only nine men had made it out. The survivors wearily braced against the shuddering walls of the lifter as it climbed. None of them looked triumphant – the atmosphere was decidedly muted.

In the centre of the bay stood the object of the mission. The transit crate was undamaged. It hadn't taken a single hit. It stood between the two ranks of men,

dark and heavy like an outsized coffin. Lights strobed along its ridged surface. It looked almost belligerent.

Hassan staggered over to it.

'What are you doing?' asked Farouk, looking at him with alarm.

Hassan began to deactivate the locking mechanism.

'We lost men for this,' he said coldly. 'I have a right to see what they died for.'

Hassan saw Imperial courtiers decked out in robes of vermillion and saffron-yellow, scholars with pale faces and work-curved spines, Tech-priests wearing golden facemasks with glowing clusters of green eyes. Each room had a different smell, a different sound, a different ambience. They were distillations of humanity, those rooms – variegated snapshots of what the species had become.

Hassan found them mesmerising. He wanted to linger, to study them, to ask what tasks they were engaged in.

Malcador seemed to read his mind. 'Ignore them,' he said. 'They are ephemera compared to what I will show you.'

They kept walking. The lights and splendour faded away. Hassan and the Sigillite descended through levels, travelling down ancient elevator shafts in sleet-grey cages hung from chains the width of a man's waist.

It got warmer. Uncomfortably so. Hassan began to have the sense of something vast and ancient pressing down upon him. He saw the ungilded roots of the mountain beneath the pooled light of bronze-rimmed lumens, dark with streaks of granite and feldspar.

'When we reach our destination, remain close to me,' warned the Sigillite. 'While you are with me none will challenge you. Stray from my side and you will die. Do not be fooled by what you see. Not all the sentries down here are *visible*.'

Hassan said nothing, but nodded.

Eventually they reached the bottom, the very heart of the mountain. The cage ground to a halt and the doors slid open. A vaulted cavern stretched away from them, its floor smooth and polished like onyx, its vast emptiness broken by great pillars of hewn stone. It yawned away into the gloom of the underworld, as quiet and eerie as the upper levels had been bustling.

'Immense,' Hassan murmured to himself. 'And under my feet the whole time. How could such a place be hidden? How many know of this?'

Only a few figures moved across the glassy floors: senior Mechanicum adepts in blood-red robes, silent stony-faced women wearing ornate suits of battle-

armour and long fur-lined cloaks, towering sentinels clad in baroque plates of gold and carrying force-staves that hummed with fierce energies. These last were, he knew, the Legio Custodes – the Emperor's own. Hassan found himself sweating again.

The Sigillite walked out across the cavern floor, the metal butt of his staff clanking as he moved. None of the others acknowledged him – they seemed preoccupied. Those whose faces were visible betrayed expressions of resolve. Some bore signs of extreme fatigue.

Hassan followed. The whole place was almost unbearably strange. An austere, murmuring vault of shadows locked away beneath the foundations of the world.

'What is this place?' Hassan whispered, finding it surprisingly hard to keep up with the old man's pace.

'The beginning,' said the Sigillite. 'And perhaps the end.'

They kept moving. Hassan saw branching tunnels leading off deeper into the mountain. Some were little more than man-sized doorways, some were gaping avenues large enough for a Titan to pass through. He smelled the acrid tang of incense and felt a seismic rumbling from far beneath his feet. Every so often the ground would shudder, as if rocked by distant quakes, though none of the silent figures around them seemed to react.

'They are so subdued,' said Hassan, not meaning to speak. His thoughts seemed to spill out of his mouth, as if eager to break the oppressive silence.

The Sigillite paused to consider that. His head tilted as he observed the figures around him. 'How do you wish them to be?' he asked at length. 'They dwell in the forgotten halls of gods, but each has his task. They cannot pause to reflect. None of us can.' He smiled thinly. 'That, of course, may be the origin of all of this. We never had time to reflect. A fine epitaph, for an overbold species.'

He started to walk again, and Hassan hurried along in his wake.

At length, the Sigillite paused before an opening in the cavern wall. The smell of chemicals bled out of the gap. Twenty sigils had been carved over a low granite lintel, most only half visible in the shadows. Hassan made out a wolf's head, a snake, an angel, and other more obscure devices. It looked like two of the symbols had been scratched out or had worn away.

The Sigillite studied them for a moment. His face was sombre.

'That was where we planned them,' he said. 'The archives are still there – His notes, the first studies. Some of the early gene-banks might still be there too, for all I know. Left behind when we created the main facility. Sad, really.'

Hassan looked down the long tunnel. He couldn't see far. 'Is that where we're

going?' he asked.

The Sigillite shook his head. His staff started to clank again. 'No one goes there now.'

They kept moving. More archways passed by, each one sunk deep in the cavern's permanent gloom. As the sheer scale of the underground realm became apparent, Hassan began to feel a strange sense of regret. The entire complex was evidently the work of many centuries, a subterranean city hidden from the eyes of the world and buried under miles of solid rock. So much of it was abandoned, left to moulder amid the echoes like the graves of ancient kings. So much else was unfinished.

Something had gone badly wrong.

Hassan wondered, where was the Emperor in all of this? Did He still tread these halls? The very thought of it sent cold shivers running down his back. For the first time Hassan began to wonder if worse things existed than civil war against a renegade Warmaster. If those things slumbered in semi-ruined chambers buried deep in Terra's crust, then he was not sure that he wished to uncover them.

'We are here,' said the Sigillite abruptly, stopping before a great iron-bound doorway. It was spiked and padlocked, like the entrance to some torture chamber of the age-shrouded past.

Hassan looked at it and barely suppressed a shudder. 'We're going in?' he asked, already knowing the answer.

'Not yet,' said Malcador. 'First, tell me how you failed.'

Hassan reached for the locking pins and pulled them back. Once the seals had been broken they withdrew easily.

Farouk and the others said nothing, but watched from around the shuddering edge of the lifter's crew compartment.

Hassan unclipped the final hooks and the lid shifted in his hands. The top plate ran the length of the crate – it was as thick as his hand. Hassan pushed his fingers under it and eased it up gently. As he did so, he smelled old dust sighing from the gap. A first twinge of unease ran through him.

He pushed the lid further back. A single bulky object lay within the crate, bound with what looked like hessian sacking.

He took a knife from his boot and started to cut. Even once he'd seen what was inside he kept cutting. He didn't stop until every scrap of sacking was peeled back and hacked away, just to make sure.

At the end, he stood straight, gazing down at his handiwork.

He felt sick, light-headed. He reached out to steady himself.

'What is it?' asked Farouk.

Hassan couldn't reply immediately. A sense of painful emptiness fell over him, choking off a response. When he did speak, his voice was strained.

'*Nothing*,' he said. 'Nothing at all.'

Farouk unstrapped himself then and clambered over to the crate. He looked inside and saw what Hassan had seen.

'Ah,' he said.

Inside the crate was a huge hunk of rock, granite perhaps, just like the thousands that riddled the semi-desert around the compound, filthy with storm-blown grime and cracked along one edge. It filled most of the crate interior: heavy enough to be plausible, perhaps the weight of a dismantled Rapier platform. It was slightly tapered at one end, otherwise blocky and crude. It might once have been a building block, discarded among the rubble of some old demolition site and left to wear away in the desert wind.

Farouk didn't say anything else for a long time. 'They knew we were coming,' he remarked eventually.

Hassan nodded. 'Duped. From the beginning.'

'We got the right bunker?'

'We did.'

'You sure?' asked Farouk. 'Perhaps–'

'*We got the right bunker!*' shouted Hassan.

Farouk shrunk back. No one else spoke. The lifter's engines thudded away angrily.

'So what are you going to do?' asked Farouk.

Hassan drew in a long, weary breath. 'What do you recommend?' he asked sardonically. He looked over to the embarkation ramp. 'I should cast it loose. Throw it out, send it back to the desert where it came from.'

His chin slumped against his chest.

'Seriously?' asked Farouk.

Hassan smiled grimly, and shook his head. 'Don't worry. We were told to bring it back, so we'll do just that.'

'There'll be a reckoning for this,' sighed Farouk.

Hassan leaned back against the cargo bay wall, feeling a powerful headache coming on. 'Oh, I know that,' he said. 'But from who? Who ordered it?'

The lifter continued onwards, hastening them towards the consequences of failure.

‘I guess we’ll find out soon enough,’ he said.

‘A stone,’ said the Sigillite.

‘Yes, lord,’ said Hassan, feeling his cheeks flush. ‘They made fools of us.’

‘I see.’

The Sigillite turned back to the doorway. Locks clunked open. The great spiked door swung inwards, rasping on its hinges. Malcador raised a long, bony finger and a soft glow of lumen strips bloomed up from floor level.

‘Come,’ he said.

The chamber beyond was small in comparison to the others he’d seen – only a hundred metres in length, perhaps, with a low ceiling and rough, unfinished walls. Box-like cases stood at regular intervals. Each was a different size and shape, mounted on pedestals of marble. Some were as tall as he was, some were no larger than his fist. Every case was dark, glinting smoothly like cut crystal.

‘Before Unity, before Strife,’ said Malcador, moving between the cases like an old hunched ghost, ‘we built these walls. We built them to last. Only later did other men raise their spires around and above them, burying our secrets beneath their own.’ His voice was proud and wistful. ‘This is the last Repository of the Sigillites. We are watched by unsleeping guardians and ringed with ancient wards against ruin. Here are kept the most dangerous and powerful creations of our species. You should feel privileged, Khalid. Not many men have seen these things.’

As the Sigillite walked, he gestured to some of the cases. Their glass surfaces lit up, exposing the objects held within. Hassan caught glimpses of them as they passed by.

‘It still makes me proud, on occasion,’ the Sigillite went on. ‘The Palace is His, of course – it always has been. But it was built atop a much older structure. The cradle of my Order. These are the last foundations of the original fortress, preserved in the depths, a relic of another age. I remember it how it was, as so few now do. Only those who linger, who endure as the ages cycle by, but we are a scattered fraternity.’

Hassan saw a long curved sword engraved with flowing script. He saw books, their metal covers thick with the patina of ages, locked closed and bound with chains. He saw suits of armour hung from iron frames – some were of impossibly old design, plates of polished steel interleaved with linked-mesh chain. Others looked more modern, like the bulky, half-dismantled power armour of the Legiones Astartes.

The Sigillite paused before one in particular. ‘The very first,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘Such a simple principle, compared to those that came later. But so very effective.’

Hassan let his eyes wander across the other cases. ‘These are weapons,’ he said. ‘Tools of war.’

‘Some of them.’ Malcador started walking again, heading towards the far end of the chamber. ‘A species is defined by many things. As it lives, as it grows, it creates artefacts. It passes its genius into those things. They become a part of its soul, a living record of its psyche. We create. We fashion, we mould, we make. That is the essence of us, what sets us apart from the beasts, who cannot, and the gods, who do not deign to.’

The Sigillite gestured to a smaller cabinet on his left. It contained one of the chamber’s many books.

‘There was a time when that book governed the lives of trillions,’ he said. ‘None read it now, but its power still remains, locked deep in our unwaking minds. I have studied it many times. Were it not so dangerous, I would recommend you do the same.’ He smiled in the dark. ‘*All is vanity, saith the preacher*. Perhaps the greatest truth of all.’

Malcador finally halted before another large, square case. It was as tall as he was, though wider, and remained unlit and opaque.

‘If the Palace above us were destroyed, how much would be lost?’ he asked. ‘Many palaces have come and gone, many wars have been fought. But *these* things, they are the treasures of our kind. Without them, we are like children lost in the night. Cast adrift. Truly homeless.’

The casket before them blossomed into illumination, revealing its contents.

The stone from Gyptus stood there, but it had changed. The dust had been cleaned from it, leaving a smooth, polished sheen. Hassan could see words and glyphs on the flat surface, hundreds of them, all engraved in tight, dense lines.

‘Not a weapon,’ he said, finally understanding.

‘No, not a weapon,’ said the Sigillite. ‘They do not aim to destroy only our fortresses and our starships. They aim to destroy the things that make us what we are. They seek out every accomplishment and marker of success and throw them down, erasing the past, plunging us into forgetfulness.’ He gazed at the stone. ‘I am the custodian of such things. Dorn is more than capable of marshalling our physical defences – my task is the preservation of our species’ soul.’

Hassan drew closer to the glass. He could make out pictographic shapes near the top of the stone face, some of them similar to the ones he’d seen over the

empty lintel.

'What does it say?' he asked.

The Sigillite smiled. 'It is the record of an ancient conquest. Some ironies have been waiting for us for millennia.' Malcador ran his fingertip along a line of text, reading out loud. '*The Manifest God protects all those who are subject to his kingship – he being a god, the son of a god and a goddess, like Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, who protects his father.* Like Horus, who protects his father. Appropriate, no?'

Hassan couldn't raise a smile. 'Then this was what you intended.'

The Sigillite nodded. 'You did what was asked of you. This thing is what the ancients called the Rosetta Stone. I wished to have it. The enemy wished to have it. Your actions gave us one small victory to set against a tide of defeat. Worth having, I think, despite the cost.'

Hassan narrowed his eyes. 'Why did they want it?' he asked.

'It is a symbol. It stands for the recovery of lost knowledge, for the continuity of civilisations. If they had taken it then they would have destroyed it. A trivial loss, you might think, set against the deaths of billions to come, but I would have felt it.' Malcador's eyes never left the stone. They shone wetly in the dark, as if some great emotion pressed against his soul. 'When this is over, should we be victorious, we will have need of these things. We shall remember the tools of enlightenment so we will never forget how close we skirted the barbarity of despotism. I will see to it. That shall be my task, as it has ever been my task – to keep us from *forgetting*.'

He turned to Hassan.

'For what would we gain,' asked the Sigillite, 'should we win the war and yet lose sight of why we fought it? *Enlightenment*, Khalid. Progress. Ascension into something better. That is what we are struggling to preserve.'

Hassan turned his head away, looking back over the collection of objects. 'You still have not told me what I am doing here,' he said.

'No, not yet,' said the Sigillite, moving back towards the chamber entrance. 'Come, I have one more thing to show you.'

As they walked, the subterranean rumblings Hassan had heard earlier grew in frequency. It felt at times as if the entire floor were trembling, taut and fragile like a drumskin.

'What *is* that?' Hassan asked.

The Sigillite paused. 'I told you,' he said. 'The war has started. You are close to

the heart of it. You have heard myths of the Emperor being absent, that He has forgotten His people. It is not so. He will never forget. But He cannot withdraw, not now that the seal is broken.'

He pressed his lips together, his expression hardening.

'In truth I have not yet learned to blame Horus,' he said. 'Until I see him again, changed by the powers that have consumed him, I may not be able to. But I do blame Magnus. Of all of them, he should have known better. We had so many hopes for Magnus.' He shook his head bitterly and kept on walking. 'So many hopes indeed.'

They went deeper, passing down spiral stairways cut from the living rock. The air began to smell of burning metal. They passed more of the Custodes, some of whom bore scorch-marks and deep rents on their glittering armour. The walls themselves trembled.

Eventually they entered another grand chamber, one that eclipsed all those that had come before. It soared up into the eternal darkness, lost in shadow. Massive censers hung on iron chains, their pans glowing with red coals and pungent with incense. More Custodians had gathered there, alongside the silent female warriors.

None of them held Hassan's attention. He stared up at the central feature of the distant far wall: a pair of massive golden doors, each the height of a Warlord Titan, each covered in a dazzling tapestry of astrological and mythic icons, overlapping and interwoven in a riot of gilt imagery – a great panoply of serpents, wolves and angels.

The thunderous impacts came from beyond the doors. At times it seemed as if they were barely holding, despite their colossal size.

Hassan shrank back. The scale of what was taking place on the other side cowed him.

'This is the outermost edge,' said the Sigillite. 'A dozen such doors stand between you and the horror, and still you feel it.'

'*I cannot go in there*,' Hassan whispered.

'No, you cannot,' said Malcador. His voice had become softer, imbued with a deep, primordial sadness. His withered face gazed up at the doors, and his eyes shone in the dark. 'Even I cannot. These doors will not open until the end.'

Hassan couldn't look away. The noises on the far side were horrific. He thought he caught echoes of unearthly screaming – the strangled discharge of terrible, inhuman energies.

'No weapon you could have brought me would compare to those used in there,'

said the Sigillite. ‘No war has ever been more savage, and yet its existence will never be known. Whatever horrors are destined to take place in the material universe pale in comparison. You stand upon the threshold, captain. This is to be the true battle for the soul of humanity.’

Hassan tried to master himself. ‘And is… *He* in there?’

‘He is.’

Hassan shrank back. The thought, the very *idea*, of anything surviving in that unseen maelstrom seemed impossible. His imagination failed him. It was too immense to process.

‘You will never have to go through those doors, Khalid,’ said the Sigillite. ‘I only show you them so that you will understand.’

After a while, he turned away. Hassan followed him closely.

‘For now, I too remain on *this* side,’ said the Sigillite, ‘undertaking all that must be undertaken to preserve our species’ legacy. But a time will come when I must put these things away and make a choice. When that time comes, others will take on my work. So let me tell you why I really brought you here.’

The Sigillite looked at Hassan. His gaze was almost painful in its intensity.

‘I collect individuals as well as stones,’ he said. ‘I collect souls of integrity, capable of rebuilding what will surely be lost. Some are warriors, some masters of psychic potential, some merely mortals. They will all be needed. They are to be my Chosen, the kernel of greater things to come. I require disciples of the Repository, acolytes to guard the treasures when I cannot. I need souls to guard the flames of Enlightenment and fight the onset of ignorance. The eternal chain must not be broken, even if I am.’ The Sigillite stopped walking. ‘Will you join me, Khalid? Will you join this brotherhood?’

When the question came, Hassan surprised himself. He did not hesitate. Suddenly, it felt right, as if the question had been waiting for him all his life.

‘It is my duty,’ he said. ‘I will do whatever you command.’

‘It is not an order, captain. Orders are for Warmasters and primarchs. I merely create possibilities. But I am glad.’

Malcador made as if to move away again, but Hassan stayed where he was.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, looking back over his shoulder to where the golden doors stood and trembled. ‘You said you had to make a choice. Might I… Can I ask–’

‘What it is?’ The Sigillite smiled, though the gesture was a bitter one, as if reflecting on a lifetime of squandered promise. ‘We all have our fears, Khalid,’ he added quietly.

Hassan gazed then at the man’s aged face. For the first time he did not feel the

aura of tremendous power, nor the weight of arcane wisdom.

He saw frailty. He saw dread.

The Sigillite took a deep breath. ‘But nothing is certain. Hope remains. Hope always remains.’

Then he moved away, striding back into the catacombs, the butt of his staff clicking against the stone.

Hassan watched him go – the Regent of Terra, the master of the Imperium’s countless billions, and the hand of the Emperor’s vengeance.

And at that moment, to him at least, the Sigillite resembled none of those things. He seemed then to Khalid Hassan – formerly of the Fourth Clandestine Orta, now the Chosen of Malcador – nothing more than an old man, worn out by an eternity of service, stumbling into the dark.

Hassan felt a momentary stab of pity. Then he stirred himself, hurrying after the Sigillite, not looking back towards the sealed gateway into hell but heading up instead towards the gilded terraces of the Imperial Palace.

Up there it would be possible to forget the fractured screaming of the terrible battle that raged in the depths.

Up there, for a time at least, the sun still shone.

WOLF HUNT

Graham McNeill

Yasu Nagasena stands by a window of the square tower at the north-eastern corner of his mountain villa, letting the cold cut into his face. Built on the flanks of a mountain known as Cho Oyu, the villa has been his home for fifty years, and memories surround him like restless ghosts. Mournful winds from the far corners of the world sigh through the tower, each bearing the sound of pounding hammers, a billion migrant voices and the fear of an entire planet.

The mountains crowd this continent, rowdy giants standing shoulder to shoulder as they reach to the heavens. Sunlight spills over them in a golden tide, gleaming from the exposed quartz and feldspar.

The mountains are saying goodbye, giving him a last sight of their glory.

The villa occupies a fortuitous position, looking out over the Palace at the crown of the world. Through the windows, he can see its triumphal processionals, its high towers and its fresh-wrought defences. Beyond the Palace walls, the Petitioners' City. Once a place of pilgrimage, now an overcrowded slum of people desperately seeking protection.

Nagasena turns from the window. The wooden stretching frame still sits here, undisturbed since he last let his heart bleed out through his brushstrokes. The silk is still strung to the frame, still taut and bearing his painted image of the Palace.

It no longer looks like the Palace visible through the windows.

The Emperor is remaking the galaxy, but Rogal Dorn is remaking the Palace.

Once it was a thing of beauty, but it is ugly now, the craft of the engineer pasted over the vision of the architect.

'It is not a harmonious union, Lord Dorn,' says Nagasena, surprising himself by

speaking aloud.

He has spoken little since the end of his hunt for the escaped warriors of the Crusader Host. What began as a hunt ended in sanctioned murder, and he does not yet know whether the truth was served by its execution.

Nagasena hears the slap of sandals on the marbled stairs, accompanied by the heaving breath of Amita. She has maintained his household for as long as he has lived here, and is as robust and solid as the mountains.

Amita reaches the top of the tower, her skin ruddy from the climb and strands of grey-streaked hair hanging loose over her face. She frowns at Nagasena's clothes – a lacquered breastplate of black and bronze, reinforced canvas leggings tucked into leather-faced boots. But something has changed within him since his return from the Petitioners' City and she lets his improper attire pass without comment.

'You asked to see me?' she asks.

He nods, looking back down over the sprawling immensity of the Palace. Far below, a towering siege Titan is lifting vast ouslite blocks from the Dhawalagiri elevation, the workmanship too precious to be destroyed or built over. He wonders if that stone will ever see the light of day again.

'Yes, I have something to give you,' says Nagasena.

'Here?' replies Amita.

'No,' says Nagasena. 'In my private chambers.'

'You couldn't have summoned me *there* instead of making me climb all these stairs?'

'My apologies, Amita,' says Nagasena. 'I lingered here longer than I intended.'

'That doesn't make my old bones feel any better.'

Nagasena smiles. In any other household, Amita's brusqueness would see her dismissed, but her blunt honesty matches his adherence to the truth over all things.

'Have I been a good master to serve?' he asks.

Nagasena likes the fact that she takes the time to think about her answer instead of simply voicing a platitude.

'You have always been courteous and grateful. The staff think you cold, but you are just sorrowful. More so now.'

Nagasena nods. It is a fair assessment.

'Come with me,' he says, moving past her to begin the long descent of the tower. Amita follows, and they emerge into the rose garden where he wishes he could have spent more time.

They follow the hypaethral around the garden and into the well-proportioned chambers of the villa. He cannot call it his home, not any more. Not now that Lord Dorn has charged him with this last hunt.

He opens the doors to his private chambers, and beckons Amita to enter. She reluctantly follows him within, barely registering the silk hanging scrolls depicting ancient maps of long-forgotten realms: Atlantea, Hyperborea and Dalriada.

Nagasena makes his way to shelves laden with papers and heavy textbooks. He pulls out a wax-sealed document and sits cross-legged behind his narrow desk. Writing implements are arranged neatly on its polished surface and he beckons Amita to sit as he breaks the seal.

Nagasena dips a sharpened eagle feather in a pot of ink and signs his name at the bottom of the document. He turns the paper around and holds the quill out to Amita.

'Sign your name next to mine and you will be the owner of this villa,' he says.

'You're giving me the villa?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'Why?' she asks.

'You have more than earned it.'

Amita does not reach for the quill.

'You are going on another hunt?' she asks.

'I am,' he confirms, placing the quill on the desk.

He rises smoothly and runs his hand over the wall behind him in a series of complex gestures. It slides back, revealing a deep compartment filled with gleaming armour and racked weapons. It is an armoury worthy of a Legion quartermaster.

'Who is it this time?'

Nagasena removes a hand-tooled long-las and a silver-chased volkite pistol, weapons capable of harming the man he is to hunt. These are not implements of pursuit and capture, but execution.

'A Luna Wolf.'

'A warrior of the Legions?'

'A warrior of Horus' Legion,' clarifies Nagasena.

He slings the long-las over his shoulder and holsters the pistol before reverently lifting a scabbard of lacquered wood, jade and mother of pearl from a rack of rich cherrywood. The sword's handle is wound in leather of the palest cream and its blade was crafted with love and an attention to detail that no machine will

ever replicate.

Nagasena knows the weapon as *Shoujiki.*

'You do not expect to return,' she says.

'A reasonable expectation,' he says.

'Who gives you this hunt?'

'Lord Dorn.'

She nods, knowing Nagasena could not have refused a primarch's order.

'If I am to die on this hunt, I do not wish to leave loose ends in my wake. The villa is to be yours. This is my wish.'

Amita pushes the document away. 'If I am told you are dead, I will sign it, but not before.'

Nagasena is humbled by her fierce devotion and belts *Shoujiki* around his waist. His hand settles naturally on the textured grip.

'Sign it,' he says softly. 'Even if I kill this man, I do not think I will return.'

'Why not?'

'Because the mountains have said goodbye,' says Nagasena.

Amita nods, accepting his cryptic answer.

'This Luna Wolf, does he have a name?' she asks.

'His name is Severian,' says Nagasena.

The wolf was in the fold, but none of the sheep had seen him or even suspected he was there. The hab-tenement in which Severian made his lair existed in a perpetual state of incremental collapse. Tremors shook the dust from its walls with every hammer blow of titanic machinery on the construction fields before the Palace.

Two thousand people crowded the building, taking what privacy they could with tarpaulins hung on a complex web of intersecting clotheslines. Severian was a ghost, unseen and unheard over the building's moans and the crack and snap of the partitioning tarps.

Three days he had hidden between the walls and in the rotten ceiling spaces of the tenement, listening to the static hiss in his helmet and fighting the urge to keep moving. The hunters expected him to try and break the cordon around the Petitioners' City. They hoped he would flee the slaughter at the Temple of Woe, but stillness was his cloak now, not action.

Hundreds of Black Sentinels had flooded the city, sweeping through the despairing streets in search of him.

He had seen no sign of Imperial Fists or Custodians.

What could be important enough to keep *them* from the hunt?

The mortal soldiers moved through the city like beaters on a game hunt, but it was simplicity itself to evade them.

These men had never hunted a Luna Wolf before, and they–

No, not a Luna Wolf, a Son of Horus…

The Warmaster was no stranger to the value of ego displays, but even he had balked at the renaming of an entire Space Marine Legion in his honour.

It seemed that his reluctance had now been overcome.

Severian still thought of himself as a Luna Wolf; the lone predator hunting in the gloaming light of the moon. A Son of Horus would fight his way through this city, but only a Luna Wolf could pass unknown through its streets.

He still wore the armour he had stripped from the Thunder Warrior's enforcers. The plates were ill-fitting, fashioned in an age where immediacy was a greater concern than functionality. The helm-vox buzzed with static, bubbling with the ghost voices of long-dead warriors.

He could tune out the static, but it was harder to ignore the voices of the people around him.

The subject on everyone's lips was the Warmaster's rebellion and the massacre on Isstvan V. Trembling mouths told and retold tales of murder and atrocity. Lies and speculation masqueraded as fact.

But every taleteller agreed that Horus was a betrayer, a vile and faithless son.

Severian could not bring himself to believe his primarch had turned against the Emperor. What reason could the Warmaster have to embark upon such a calamitous course? Severian could think of nothing grand enough to warrant betrayal, his mind rejecting every possibility as too petty, too improbable or too *mortal* to justify a galaxy-wide rebellion.

Atharva had seemed so certain of Horus' betrayal, but that was always the way with the Crimson King's sons. They lived for certainty, but Atharva was dead, a primarch's bullet in his brain. What did his certitudes count for now?

Severian heard the crunch of approaching footsteps and slowed his breathing, letting himself merge with the rotting lath and plaster of the ceiling. The footsteps stopped beneath him; three men carrying plastic drums to be filled with water from the pump. Severian's ability to remain hidden in plain sight was superlative, an affinity with shadows that came to him as naturally as breathing.

It was a risk concealing himself in an area frequented by the people that called this block home, but the risks were outweighed by the morsels of information he could gather.

The first man, thickset and with the build of a metalworker, placed his drum beneath the pump and began working the handle. The water that came out was brackish-looking and gritty.

The other men took turns at the pump, and their talk was banal and mundane. Inevitably, their discussion turned towards the fighting in the Isstvan System.

'It's that bastard, Horus,' said the metalworker. 'He's the one that started this. Changing the name of his Legion like that. Too big an ego that one, and no mistake.'

'I reckon you're right,' agreed a skeletal man with eyes as big as saucers and whose sweat stank of an addict's hunger.

'What did the Emperor expect?' asked a balding man with a hooked nose and a withered right arm. 'I mean, you give a man that much power and it's bound to go to his head.'

The men nodded at the sagacity of their companion.

The metalworker spoke again. 'Yeah, you get that many guns and all you want to do is shoot 'em off, right? Look at Isstvan Three, wiped out with virus bombs. Madness.'

'I heard Horus killed three of his brothers single-handed,' said the addict. 'Vulkan, Corax and Leman Russ. All dead as dust.'

'The Wolf King weren't on Isstvan,' said the balding man. 'It's Ferrus Manus that's dead. They say the Phoenician killed him. Cut his head right off.'

'Nah,' said the thin man. 'I don't reckon anyone could kill that tough old bastard. Got bones of iron, he has. How you gonna cut through that?'

'Horus could do it,' said the metalworker. 'Got bad blood in him, ain't he? Everyone says so. I heard he got poisoned. Some cult got him sick and twisted his mind. Shoura says she heard Horus is one of this cult now, him and all his warriors. Sacrifice women and children, I hear. Throw them into the fires and let them burn in the name of some god or other.'

The man leaned in conspiratorially. 'Yeah, no better than savages now, she says. Cannibals they are, eating the flesh of the dead and making trophies from their bones.'

Severian ground his teeth. To hear his beloved primarch and Legion being slandered with such obvious nonsense was almost more than he could stand. His fingers tightened on the rusting rebars and pipes, and the metal squealed as it buckled beneath his strength. The metalworker looked up, and their eyes met through the sodden ceiling structure.

Severian willed the man not to see him, focusing every ounce of his

determination. The man looked away with a curious expression on his face, as though suddenly bewildered. Severian exhaled softly, seeing his breath feather the air in front of him.

'I heard that said too,' the balding man agreed. 'They say Horus has gone mad, that he's been… you know… *possessed*.'

The others laughed.

'Possessed?' said the addict, his voice reedy and laced with need.

'Y'know, by aliens or something,' said the metalworker.

Severian could stand it no longer, and dropped to the floor with a heavy crash. The metalworker and the addict jumped back from the pump in shock, but the balding man turned tail and ran for his life. Severian's hand shot out and a piece of brickwork, no larger than a pebble, flashed from his palm.

It struck the balding man like a bullet from a slingshot. The impact spun him around, and he collapsed with an egg-sized lump on the back of his skull. Drool and blood leaked from the corner of his mouth.

'You killed him,' breathed the metalworker.

'No,' said Severian, drawing the serrated knife belted at his hip. 'Though he deserves death for disrespecting the Warmaster.'

'You're him, ain't ya?' said the addict, wringing his hands and worrying at the nailbeds of his fingers. 'You're the one they're all looking for.'

Severian ignored him.

'You're like ignorant children,' snapped Severian. 'You know nothing of Lord Horus, the battles he won and the blood he spilled for his father. My Legion waged war across the heavens for two hundred years, conquering the galaxy in the name of humanity. And this is the thanks we get? I should kill you all. You ought to be building statues of the Warmaster and shrines to his deeds. *Horus* has won the galaxy for you, not the Emperor.'

The addict crumpled to his knees, weeping and pawing at Severian's boots. The Luna Wolf kicked him away in disgust, drawing a cry of pain from the man's lips. The metalworker swallowed hard and looked up at Severian.

'Horus is a traitor,' said the man. 'The Emperor said so…'

Severian's fist drew back, his arm quivering with tension. One tap and the man's skull would be in a hundred fragments.

'The Warmaster is the Emperor's beloved son,' said Severian through gritted teeth. 'These things you say… They cannot be true. I would know of it.'

The metalworker fell to his knees with his hands laced before him as though in prayer. His terror sickened Severian. The emotion was too unknown to him and

made Severian want to kill him even more.

'You are what we fought for?' laughed Severian, the sound as anguished as it was derisive.

He leaned down and placed the tip of the knife against the man's chest.

'Your kind doesn't deserve to inherit the galaxy,' he said. 'Your life isn't worth one drop of Legion blood.'

'Please… don't… kill me,' sobbed the man.

Severian sheathed his knife and looked at the man with the eyes of a god who stared upon his failed creation.

He turned away in disgust, robbed of certainty and adrift on unknown tides.

The light was falling away to evening as Severian left the hab-tenement. He moved through narrow streets taken by decay, avoiding the thoroughfares and arteries of the Petitioners' City. Every junction would have a complement of soldiers stationed at its corners and rooftops.

His steps were sure and swift. A lone wolf, he owned the silence and made the shadows his own. There were few people abroad in these narrow alleyways, only the occasional footpad or lost soul, and they wisely kept out of his way.

He did not kill as he went. A body was a trail, but a frightened man kept his own counsel.

The heavy-handed approach of the soldiers sweeping the streets was working in Severian's favour. Word of the Black Sentinels' brutal search tactics had spread quickly, and now no one was admitting to anything.

They had no clue where he was heading.

The villa of the Emperor's Warmason was a shining bauble atop the granite scarp above the Temple of Woe. Severian's route had taken him in a looping course away from his pursuers and back around to where he had begun, ready to climb that cliff to where the Warmason kept his orbit-capable flyer.

Vadok Singh, like many of his gene-bred bloodline, favoured elevated positions from which to observe his works and it was from here that Severian would begin his journey back to his Legion.

To prove the falsehood of the accusations levelled against his primarch or to call him to account for his crimes.

Severian paused at an irregular confluence of narrow streets of corrugated steel and looted cinderblocks. He pressed himself to the wall as he heard the tramp of booted feet from his left. Muffled voices echoed with a curious metallic quality from the walls, and Severian picked out five speakers. A combat squad, which

meant there was likely another one nearby. Severian crouched like a runner awaiting the starting pistol and closed his eyes, letting his hearing take up the sensory slack.

There, behind him, moving through the building to his rear.

They moved carefully, which meant they knew he was nearby.

A crackle of vox, a hushed voice calling for backup.

Moisture dripped from above, and Severian looked up to see a young girl leaning from a scaffolded trellis. Dressed in a simple green shift with a red flower pinned to her breast, she saw him and waved. Severian watched the play of muscles around her mouth and knew she was about to call out to him.

His hand closed on a sharp-edged rock. He could put it through her skull before she spoke, angling his throw so she would fall back into her dwelling. Instead he lifted a finger to his lips and shook his head.

He saw panic in her eyes as she retreated into the building, and shook his head in disbelief.

Legion warriors were avatars of battle, but when had they become figures of fear to human beings? He remembered the cheering multitudes at the expeditionary fields as the marching hosts of Space Marines had left for a life of war. The crowds had laughed and cheered them, but those days were gone.

Now they were murderous killers, savage weapons that could turn and blood their creators as easily as their foes.

The spaces between the buildings were hung with wet sheets like the battle flags won by the Legion in its earliest days; the reclamation of the asteroid belt, the taking of the outer planets and the first push out into the wilderness of space beyond the solar system.

How many more victory banners were now hung in the Museum of Conquest aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*? What glories had passed Severian by as he rotted on Terra as little more than a ceremonial figurehead of wars he would never fight?

Severian let out a soft sigh, forcing down the random jumping of his thoughts when there was killing in the offing. He calculated the distance between him and the first man in the approaching squad. Severian counted down until a booted foot and the wavering barrel of a carbine appeared around the corner.

He swung out, keeping the Black Sentinel's body between him and the rest of the squad. A pistoning jab crushed the man's skull. He spun around the falling body, going low and swinging his leg out in a scything sweep that felled the two soldiers behind him. They dropped and Severian slammed his fists against their chests, smashing their ribs down through their lungs and stealing the air from

their screams.

He sprang forwards and chopped his hands out: hard left, hard right. The two soldiers bringing up the rear of the squad toppled, their necks broken cleanly before they had even realised they were under attack.

Severian heard the bark of urgent voices in the vox-beads clipped to their helmets.

He lifted one of the tiny voice units to his mouth. ‘Five dead and counting. Who wants to be number six?’

When Nagasena reaches the bodies, ragged scavengers have already begun to gather. They look at him with hostile eyes, debating whether or not to fight him for possession of the dead.

He already knows they will make the wrong decision.

After all, desperation makes fools of men.

There are five of them, more than enough – they think – to take down one man. Two are armed with factory-stamped stubbers, the third with a custom rig that looks more dangerous to its owner than him. Two men rush him, armed only with lengths of rusted pipe and fear-born courage.

Shoujiki whispers from its sheath and the first dies with his belly sliced open. Nagasena spins on his heel and brings the lethal edge down on the neck of the second. The head flies clear and crashes through a nearby window.

Nagasena is moving before the first body hits the ground. Stubber fire blasts from perforated barrels. The low-grade ammo makes the guns’ recoil too powerful to keep the weapons on target. Two quick cuts open the first gunner from groin to sternum.

Nagasena leaps up and his sword stabs down into the hollow behind the second gunner’s collarbone. It slices effortlessly through the man’s heart and lungs. Nagasena twists the blade free and a crimson geyser arcs over the wall as the man falls to his knees.

The last scavenger backs away, his converted pistol held out in a shaking grip. It is a primitive thing – loud, dangerous and intimidatingly large. Nagasena’s pistol matches it in lethality, but his does not waver.

‘You will miss,’ he says, ‘and then I will kill you.’

He sees the man’s decision in his eyes a fraction of a second before he knows it himself.

Nagasena presses the firing stud on his volkite pistol and a searing beam flashes into existence, linking the tapered barrel and the scavenger’s head.

The man's skull detonates as his brain cavity is superheated and the blood, oxygen and brain matter expand explosively. His headless corpse drops straight down and his finger tightens on the trigger. The report echoes through the streets of the Petitioners' City and Nagasena feels the distortion of the air as the shell tears past him to blow a shield-sized crater in the wall behind him.

He holsters his pistol and bends to wipe the blood from *Shoujiki* on a dead man's clothes. With the worst of it removed, Nagasena unfolds an oiled cloth and polishes the blade to a mirror finish once again.

He brings the blade up and touches the tip to the end of the scabbard. He pauses for a heartbeat to honour the weapon, before sliding it home in one smooth motion. He hears angry voices behind him. Men who wear the same uniform as the dead Black Sentinels killed by Severian.

A five-man combat squad, the brothers of these dead Sentinels.

A lieutenant reaches down to a fallen warrior and Nagasena opens his mouth to shout a warning, but it is too late. The dead man's body shifts and the fragmentation grenades wedged between his breastplate and the ground roll clear. Nagasena hurls himself behind a stack of crumbling bricks as they detonate with a hard, echoing bang. Fire rolls out, and in its wake comes a storm of red-hot shrapnel.

It engulfs the street, ricocheting back and forth in a flesh-shredding hurricane. The blast wave lifts the other dead bodies into the air, and grenades hidden beneath them go off in a deafening succession of secondary explosions. Nagasena puts his hands to his ears, pressing himself into a tight ball as the concussive force of the blasts punches the air from his lungs.

Tumbling fragments of hot steel slice his cheek, his arm and his neck. One embeds in *Shoujiki*'s scabbard, and he plucks the smoking metal from the lacquered wood. At last the ringing echoes of the blast diminish as it travels outwards through the streets.

He sucks in a breath of fyceline-hot air. Blood runs down his face and from his ears. His body feels like it has been worked over by an Arbiter's shock maul. Nagasena rises unsteadily to his feet, but he can see nothing of the Sentinels. He weaves a path back down the street, seeing dark, wet lumps that were once human beings scattered like butcher's offal. The smoke obscures the worst of the carnage, but not enough to keep the horror from his face.

One man is still alive.

Incredibly, it is the lieutenant who turned over the first grenade-rigged body.

Nothing is left of him below the waist, and he stares at Nagasena with pleading,

disbelieving eyes. His mouth flaps like a landed fish, trying to form words, but failing in the face of such unendurable agony. Nagasena kneels beside the lieutenant and takes his hand.

The lieutenant's eyes ease shut, as though he is falling asleep and might soon wake.

The man's hand slips from Nagasena's, who gives voice to the *jisei* composed by Master Nagamitsu on the eve of his assassination:

'Should this body die and die a thousand times over,
White bones turning to dust, with or without trace of a soul,
My steadfast heart is Truth, can it ever fade away?'

Nagasena looks up, feeling someone's gaze upon him.

Leaning from the high window of an adjacent building is a young girl, strikingly pretty, with skin so dark it puts him in mind of the Salamanders legionary he saw at the Preceptory. Her eyes are wide orbs of pale white, and she wears a crimson flower pinned to her green dress. She sees him looking at her and darts her head back inside.

The instant their eyes meet, Nagasena sees a sure and certain truth.

She has seen the Luna Wolf.

Severian moved at speed through the streets, following the mental map he had compiled in the hours after his escape from the Temple of Woe. The street plan followed no logic and changed with each passing day, but he navigated the spaces between its scrapyard palaces and junk-habs with aplomb.

Like his ability to blend, his innate sense for direction had never yet let him down. He had guided the Outcast Dead through the labyrinthine complexity of the mountain gaol with ease, and they had travelled the Petitioners' City like natives. Cities opened up to Severian, their roads rising to greet him, their highways and byways like old friends.

Frightened faces poked from openings in scavenged structures above him, some seeing him, most not. Even those who looked right at him did so with perplexed expressions, as though unsure of what exactly they were seeing.

Severian did not question this.

The shadows were lengthening and Severian kept to the walls, moving low and keeping his eyes constantly in motion. The noise of the city was familiar to him, a rustle of bodies, the clatter of pots and the sharpening of knives. Then came the

dull echoes of distant grenade blasts, and he shook his head at the foolishness of his pursuers.

Cookfires and smoke scents joined those of sweat and desperation and fear.

And beneath it all, the low-level buzz of the broken earpiece in his helmet.

He'd listened to the skirl and sway of the static during the quieter moments of his solitude, picking out the odd word here and there, like impossibly distant echoes from a bygone age seeking a connection to the present. Nothing of any use, but the interleaving ghost voices made him feel marginally less isolated. He wondered if he would eventually join them, a lone voice lost among the millions of dead in the wars fought to bring unity to a world on the verge of extinction.

A static warble, like a soft wave breaking on a golden beach, washed through the helm and Severian let the vox-fragments surf the edges of his consciousness as he slipped through the evening.

He crested a rocky defile towards the scarp upon which rested Vadok Singh's walled enclosure. He skirted the edges of what looked like a small cemetery, the three graves hacked from the rock of the mountain and marked with carved cherubs. Severian saw no names, but from the size of the holes cut into the rock, two of the dead were children.

He looked back through the jumbled silhouettes of the buildings behind him, seeing the arched roof of the Temple of Woe. Despite the wild stories of what had taken place within its walls, the people of the Petitioners' City still brought their dead to its doors.

No one would dig a grave for Severian, and the thought hardened his heart.

He began to climb.

Nagasena looks for a way into the building, eventually finding a rope-hinged doorway of nailed timbers and sheet metal. He pauses as he enters, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light. Stairs lead to a broken landing, upon which sits an ill-fashioned ladder of metal struts and baling twine. Swiftly he ascends, knowing he does not have much time until mistrust seals the girl's lips.

The floor above is a crumbling permacrete slab, divided into myriad living spaces by struts of trench shuttering. Huddled bodies crouch in their allocated spaces, gathered around stuttering thermal generators, sleeping or kneeling before opened boxes with carved fronts. Children look at him with open mouths before parents pull them away. They do not know him, but they know he is dangerous.

These people are pinched and wary, curious at the bloodshed beyond their

home, but hoping he will pass swiftly. He is an unwelcome visitor in a place he does not belong. The sensation of being a trespasser on Terra saddens him, and he wonders if these people even think of themselves as citizens of the Imperium any more.

He sees the girl in the green dress sitting with her back to the wall, her knees drawn up before her, and he makes his way towards her slowly. She looks twenty, but is probably younger. Poverty and desperation age people.

He keeps his hands in plain sight, palms up. She watches him with eyes that tell him she saw him kill the scavengers.

'You have nothing to fear from me,' he says.

'You promise?' she asks, and her desire to believe him almost breaks his heart.

Nagasena twists the sash at his waist, holding the lacquered scabbard as though offering it to her. Her eyes widen at the workmanship, and he knows she will never see anything this beautiful again.

'This sword is *Shoujiki*,' says Nagasena. 'In one of the dead languages, it means *honesty*. The man who gave it that name bound it to me with a promise to live by that principle. I am not a good man, and I have done many terrible things in my life, but I have never broken that promise.'

She searches his face for deceit, but finds none and the tension in her taut body visibly relaxes.

'You saw him,' he says. 'The Legion warrior.'

Her face crumples at the memory, and Nagasena waits, knowing it would be a mistake to force the words from her. To see a Space Marine is no small thing, and to see one make war is to witness killing fury at its most violent.

'He is not coming back,' Nagasena promises her. 'If that is what you're afraid of.'

'You don't know that,' she says. 'I saw him look at me, and he had death in his eyes.'

A single tear runs down her cheek, and Nagasena hates that the treachery of Horus has made this girl afraid of the very warriors wrought to win the galaxy in her name.

'He will never hurt you,' he says.

'How do you know that?'

'Because I am going to kill him.'

She looks up, and she gives him a crooked grin at the certainty in his voice.

'My name's Ekata,' she says. 'He went north, towards the cliffs above the Temple of Woe.'

At first Nagasena thinks she must be mistaken. Why would Severian head back to where the hunt began? Then he remembers what Severian wants and it all makes sense.

'Does that help you?' asks Ekata.

'More than you know,' says Nagasena, wishing he could help her, that he could rebuild her faith in the Imperium. Coming to a decision within himself, he removes a jade cartouche from around his neck. The polished oval stone is etched in gold with the image of a serpentine dragon. He places the cartouche in Ekata's palm and closes her fingers over it.

'Do you know the Chitwan path on the southern approaches to the upland work camps?'

'Yes, at the Primus Gate barracks.'

'Take the path until you come to a fork marked with a small cairn of black and gold rocks. Walk the path on your right and follow it uphill until you reach a red-roofed villa with the same dragon symbol on the gates. Present yourself to the mistress of the house, a woman named Amita, and tell her that Master Nagamitsu's pupil wishes you to be treated as a guest until his return. You understand?'

'Yes,' says Ekata, her smile making her beautiful.

'Go now, for night is coming and the Petitioners' City is no place to be out after dark.'

Ekata stands and unpins the crimson flower from her breast and leans forwards to attach it to Nagasena's breastplate.

'For luck,' she says, embarrassed by the superstition. 'A rosette.'

Severian had chosen a route up the eastern sides of the projecting bluffs of the cliff face to keep himself clad in shadows. The climb was difficult, the exposed face worn smooth by abrasive winds and the quarryman's drill. Each handhold was a finger-breadth wide, each toehold a sliver of a projection. More than enough for a Luna Wolf.

The sun arced further into the west, the rich blue deepening to subtle purple and the sounds of the city rising to meet him. As the sun dipped to the horizon, the Palace was bathed in its dying light, painting it the colour of blood. Severian remembered a time before it had assumed so imperious a title and appearance, when it had been no more than a mountain citadel, a bastion for a council of war – a fastness from which the conquest of the galaxy had been planned.

It had been a time for heroes, the beginning of a new epoch. For the first time in

uncounted centuries, light was eclipsing dark. The solar system was poised to fall, and the galaxy was opening up to mankind. In a mighty diaspora that echoed humanity's first great explosion into the stars, the expeditionary fleets of the Legions knifed into the void to reclaim that lost empire.

But Severian would not be part of that noble endeavour.

As the 63rd Expedition breached the heliopause, Severian was returning to Terra with full honours to join the Crusader Host. As part of a new brotherhood, he had stood proudly with his brother legionaries in glory. They had been visible paragons of the new order carving the Imperium into the flesh of the galaxy.

That time was long gone, and Severian found it increasingly difficult to reconcile that memory with his current plight. Stranded and alone, the last survivor of a disparate group of warriors thrown together by circumstance, then chosen by Atharva's design. He had long ago given up trying to understand why Atharva had only freed the seven of them when there were plainly others who would have been sympathetic to their cause.

What of the representatives of the Night Lords, the Word Bearers and the Iron Warriors?

Might their escape have fared better with a son of Nostramo or an Olympian at their side?

At first Severian didn't notice the scratching voice emerging from the static, thinking it was simply his imagination. A trick of memory and isolation. But it came again, rising like a whisper in the quiet of a deserted fane. He paused in his ascent and tapped a finger to the side of the helm.

The voice came again, louder and more distinct.

This time there was no question of what it was saying.

'*Severian*,' said the voice.

Shock pinned him to the cliff. He twisted his head left and right, then up and down. He saw nothing to indicate he was being observed, but any hunter this good wouldn't expose himself to his prey.

'*Severian*,' said the voice again.

'Who are you?' he asked, resuming his climb.

'*My name is Yasu Nagasena*.'

Severian made the connection. 'You are the hunter who tracked us to the temple.'

'*Yes, and now I have tracked you here*.'

'How is it you are talking to me?'

'*The helmet you wear belonged to a warrior from an earlier age*,' said

Nagasena. '*I saw how your fellow warriors were clad in the temple and requisitioned a similar communications device from the Palace reliquaries*.'

'Clever,' admitted Severian.

'It required no great insight on my part,' said Nagasena modestly.

'No one else thought of it.'

'*I am not everyone else*.'

'You won't be triangulating me with this,' said Severian, recalling what he knew of Unity tech-levels. 'These work on open-wavelength broadcasts. Anyone with a receiver tuned to the right frequency could hear this.'

'*I do not need to track you this way. I know where you are going and I have you in my sights right now*.'

Severian laughed, the first moment of genuine amusement he had felt in a long time.

'Then take the shot, hunter.'

Moments later a portion of the cliff face to his left puffed with the impact of a long-las round. Severian blinked away the afterimage and the acrid heat haze of dust.

'Are you psychic?' he asked. 'Has the Imperium decided that yet another class of useful psykers are worth *special dispensation*?'

Nagasena seemed amused at his outburst. '*I am not psychic, just a very good tracker. The first axiom of the tracker is to understand what your target wants*.'

'And what do I want?'

'*What death denied Atharva of the Thousand Sons and your fellows. The truth*.'

Severian paused in his climb. 'What truth?'

'*The truth of how the galaxy has changed. You are adrift, Severian. You are told your primarch has betrayed you. Betrayed the Imperium. You want to look your brothers in the eye because you cannot reconcile that truth with what you remember*.'

'I know Horus Lupercal was a better man than any other I met. He would never turn on his father.'

'*You do not really believe that*,' said Nagasena.

'Don't tell me what I believe,' snarled Severian.

'*You do not believe it because if Horus was ever to turn on his father, you know this is* exactly *how he would do it. A sudden, shocking betrayal followed by an apparently suicidal gambit that results in the massacre of the Emperor's best chance to stop the rebellion before it gains momentum*.'

Severian said nothing, knowing Nagasena was right. What little he knew of the

massacre at Isstvan V was just the manner in which Horus would open a rebellion.

'*I do not lie*,' said Nagasena. '*On the blade Shoujiki, I swear it.*'

'Then why have you not shot me from the cliff?'

'*Perhaps I will before you reach Vadok Singh's villa*.'

'I don't think so,' said Severian, resuming his climb.

'*Then let us say that Horus may be a traitor, but I do not yet know if you are.*'

Nagasena's voice faded from the helm, lost in a squall of interference from a test firing of the Palace's void generators.

Severian continued climbing, drawing closer to the top. With each moment of ascent, he wondered if Nagasena would shoot him from the cliff, but quickly dismissed the possibility. If Nagasena wanted to kill him, he would be dead already.

The sun was gone now, and only the faint haze of starlight and the arc-lights from the Bhabhar work camps and the Mechanicum ship forges on the Terai-Duar flatlands illuminated the rock face.

As he approached the lip of the cliff, he pressed his cheek to the black rock and focused his gaze on the boundary between stone and sky. Sure enough, he saw a wavering bloom of disturbed air.

The faint haze of a laser tripwire covered the full length of the cliff edge.

Severian took a firm grip of the rock in one hand and let himself dangle. He turned himself around and re-established his handholds as he braced his feet flat against the cliff, knees bent, muscles tense. He took a shallow breath and gathered his concentration, visualising the planned movement in his head, rehearsing the duration of each muscle contraction and snap of limb until he was certain of its success.

Severian pushed off, powering his legs out and up, using his handhold as a hinge about which his body arced like the overpowered swing of a pendulum. Halfway through, he released his grip and twisted his body, snapping around in a gymnast's crunch. He landed a metre beyond the edge of the cliff and dropped to his knees in a sandy courtyard, one hand pressed flat to the ground, the other balled into a fist.

He awaited the scream of an alarm, the hue and cry of a sentry or the chatter of an automated weapon system. Nothing. Only the sigh of the wind and the hiss of his own breath disturbed the silence.

'I expected better from you, Warmason,' muttered Severian. 'If you are Dorn's architect, then the Warmaster will simply walk into the Emperor's throne room.'

The courtyard was enclosed on three sides by tiered steps that led up to a cloister. Night-blooming plants with albino leaves spread themselves to the moon, and their bitter, almond scent hinted at bespoke genecraft. A stone-flagged path led around the edges of the courtyard, at the centre of which gurgled and frothed a fountain topped by the finial of a square and compass.

The numerous branches of the path enclosed rectangles of sand in which were rendered miniature sections of construction models of blockhouses, elevations and bastions. Intersecting lines of fire and dead zones were marked in the sand, together with guild markings that made no sense to Severian.

He recognised the Dhawalagiri in one, the Eternity Gate in another and the growing fortifications spreading at the opening of the Mohan. Severian ascended to the cloister, padding softly over the polished terrazzo. The heads of the flowers followed his movements.

He followed the cloister to the villa's central pavilion, a wide elevation with a tall tower at its heart from which the Warmason could survey his great works. The landing platform and Singh's tiltjet shuttle were on a raised plateau to the front of the main building. Severian had only the most basic knowledge of operating such a craft. He could fly it, but not well enough to avoid the inevitable interceptors and their seeker warheads.

No, if he was to reach the orbital plates alive, he needed to give his pursuers a reason *not* to shoot him down.

What better a reason than the Emperor's own Warmason?

Severian paused, sensing a subtle, undefinable *change* in the air. The smell of almonds had vanished, replaced by something ammoniac. Instantly his hand flashed to his blade and he pressed himself against the wall.

A panel beside him slid open, and a multi-barrelled cannon pushed out on a circular gimbal mount. A green-lensed range-finder tracked across the courtyard, and Severian saw its twin emerge from the opposite wall. Its tracker beam panned across him and green flashed to red.

A blitz of shells hammered the air and he pushed off the wall as the cannon beside him spun around. He sprang up and wrenched the barrel around, its bucking motion like wrestling a greenskin. Its servos fought him, but he kept his grip firm and walked its fire into the opposite cannon. High-velocity shells ripped through it, tearing it from the wall in a blaze of impacts.

Severian jammed his blade into the cannon's rotator mechanism, and threw himself to the side as the shells exploded in the breech, ripping the weapon apart in a spray of wild shots. He rolled to his feet and ran for the edge of the cloister.

Vaulting from one of its supporting pillars, he swung up and hauled himself onto the tiled roof as more guns unmasked below. Having seen the Warmason's schematics in the sand, Severian knew there would be no dead ground in which to hide.

Movement was his only ally here.

He ran along the ridge of the cloister's roof as a wailing siren blared in alarm and light flooded the mountainside. Previously concealed arc-lights swung up and bathed the villa in blazing illumination that left him no shadow. More of the night-blooming flowers were situated at regular intervals in ornate planters. Spores misted their heads and Severian gagged at the stench, now realising how he had been unmasked so swiftly. These were bio-engineered plants, presumably tailored to react to any unfamiliar genetic sample.

Severian vaulted onto the higher roof of the main structure as four figures emerged from cavities worked into the lower reaches of the tower. Automata, rendered in glossy black flex-metal and moving with a suppleness that only connections to the high magi of the Mechanicum could procure. Superficially human, their heads were mannequin-blank, concealing a lethal array of combat wetware grafted to the cauterised remains of a human cerebral cortex. Each was armed with a long, whipping blade and an implanted energy weapon. Two of them came straight for him, the third and fourth taking to the air on repulsor packs. A flurry of shots scythed towards him. Severian ducked and rolled, knowing on an instinctual level where their targeters would aim.

He ran towards the first, drawing and firing a Black Sentinel's pistol in one motion. The weapon was ridiculously small in his grip, but the nearest automaton went down, its head broken open. The second sprang away to the side.

Right into the arcing grenade Severian had thrown at the same instant.

The detonation sent it spinning down into the courtyard in flames. A shot struck him in the back and he grunted in pain as the beam punched through his armour. His war-plate would have stopped the shot, but this was armour of an earlier age.

He rolled and came up firing. The automata had spread out. His shots punched empty air. Severian kept moving, hearing the clatter of yet more emplaced sentinels being thrown into the fray. Escalating threat response; the more he killed, the more would come at him.

Another shot struck him, and this time searing heat burned him a cauterised wound. Severian turned as he heard the buzz of an approaching enemy. The blank-faced automaton crashed down beside him, and Severian swung two

pistols to bear. It struck out with its implanted blade, skewering him through his lower ribs. He slammed his fist down, snapping the blade at the root, and emptied one pistol's magazine into the automaton. The impacts battered it down the slope of the roof, but pitch-perfect balance-gyros kept it from toppling over the edge. It took aim at him, but a grenade at its feet blew it off the roof in a cascade of broken tiles and fire.

Severian wrenched the flex-blade from his body as the fourth automaton dropped down ten metres behind him. It had seen the destruction of the first three and was in no hurry to share their fate. Severian ran towards the tower, chased by weapons fire. Shots blistered the air around him as he saw more of the blank-faced sentinels circling the structure.

Severian skidded to a halt, dropping to a crouch. His arm lifted and shot forwards. Black, nano-carbon steel flashed and the automaton went down with a bloodied flex-blade punched through its skull. It crumpled to its knees, but Severian was already on the move.

He dived into the recess from which the nearest of the automata had emerged.

Yasu Nagasena watches the battle on the rooftop with a hunter's fascination. He is impressed that Severian has managed to penetrate this far. Vadok Singh dismissed his warning as unnecessary, yet here they stand in the Warmason's extremis chamber, surrounded by free-floating pict-feed images generated by a holosphere.

Vadok Singh is accompanied by a *migou* pit-fighting creature and two of his glossy black automata. The warrior cyborgs were crafted in the forges of Magos Lukas Chrom, a Mechanicum adept now thought to be a traitor. Singh clearly valued Chrom's work over his reputation.

The Warmason's body is tall and willowy, engineered for height and guild-work. It looks too fragile and too breakable for Terran gravity. Nagasena has been in the presence of the gene-forged many times, but something in Singh's form unnerves him more than any primarch, legionary or chimeric Mechanicum adept.

Singh glances over at him, stroking the wax-paper schemata Nagasena asked to see.

'He is resourceful,' allows Singh, his voice a mix of irritation and admiration. 'But he is just one warrior.'

'One warrior who has evaded capture by the Emperor's Custodians and the Black Sentinels. Trust me, you do not know this man.'

‘Nor do you,’ snaps Singh.

‘To hunt a man is to know him,’ answers Nagasena, his presence here surely making the truth of his words self-evident.

Singh leans forwards as an explosion on the rooftop blanks the screens for a fraction of a second. The Warmason frowns, tracking the pict-feeds on the roof around in confusion.

Severian is nowhere to be seen.

‘Where is he?’ demands Singh, as though Severian’s disappearance is a personal affront.

Nagasena has no answer for him. Severian has vanished, and he can do nothing trapped in the extremis chamber. He realises it was a mistake to trust the Warmason’s assurances that there were no blind spots in his defences.

‘Open the door,’ he says. ‘Now.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ replies Singh, sifting through myriad holos with impatient haptic gestures.

‘Open it,’ repeats Nagasena. ‘I need to be out there.’

‘Very well,’ says Singh, tapping a code into a floating keypad of light. ‘But this door will not open again. Not for you or anyone else.’

‘I understand,’ says Nagasena as the metres-thick armoured blast door swings slowly open. He slips through as soon as it is wide enough.

The corridor is empty, as is the room beyond, a high-ceilinged chamber lush with alien furs, exquisitely crafted furniture of extinct woods and gilt-framed architectural plans said to have been a gift from Perturabo himself.

He hears something heavy and metallic behind him, and at first thinks it is the door-locks of the extremis chamber closing. Then he hears a scream and realises his mistake. Nagasena spins around in time to see one of Singh’s automata spill from the door, its head a pulverised ruin of sparking circuit boards and dribbling brain matter.

He knows immediately what has happened.

Severian has infiltrated the Warmason’s tower and broken through into the extremis chamber through its most unguarded flank, the roof.

Singh’s voice sounds from within, a reedy plea for mercy, and Nagasena wonders if Severian has any left in him. Strobing flashes of gunfire light the corridor and Nagasena hears grunts of pain and the sound of a furious brawl. Singh cries out and something explodes from within. The armoured door is still trying to close, but the body of the automaton is holding it open for now.

Two fist-sized objects fly through the gap, perfectly angled to bounce from the

wall and land either side of Nagasena.

He throws himself back, dragging a heavy rosewood table after him as the fragmentation grenades explode. The blasts of fire and shrapnel are intensified in the confines of the room, and the table is blown to splinters by the impact. Sharp pain slices into him, and blood runs down his thigh. He tries to rise, but his leg gives out under him and he drops with a cry of pain.

Through the smoke of the explosion, Nagasena sees a vast shape moving towards him. He pulls his long-las tight into his shoulder and fires three shots in quick succession. He thinks all three hit, but he is smashed from his feet by a tremendous impact before he can be sure.

Nagasena lands badly on a sculpture of a golden lion. He spills from its back onto the soft furs. Ribs are broken and his leg is numb and useless. His long-las lies next to him, miraculously undamaged. Just as he reaches for it, a booted foot stamps down, breaking the weapon in two. Nagasena rolls onto his back and reaches for his sword, but the weapon is only half drawn before a fist too large to be mortal takes his arm and twists it.

Nagasena's scream is one of agony and loss, for as his wrist breaks so too does *Shoujiki*.

The broken shards spin away across the floor, and through blurred vision, Nagasena sees Severian's face. It is cruel and angular, sharply defined where many of his gene-brothers have a curious flattening of their features.

'You let me live on the cliff,' says Severian. 'Now I return the favour.'

Nagasena sees that Severian carries the unconscious form of Vadok Singh under his arm, as easily as a man might carry a rolled up sheaf of papers.

'You will not leave Terra,' Nagasena promises him.

'Watch me,' says Severian, dropping Singh to the floor.

The legionary pushes open the wide doors that lead to the courtyard and the landing platforms. Automata descend from the roof on glowing flight packs, but they do not attack. Their targeting wetware has specific rules of engagement, and Singh's own parameters for his safety render them impotent. Nagasena loses sight of Severian, gritting his teeth against the pain.

With his good arm, he drags himself across the floor. Every movement causes blood to pump from his wounded leg. He should lie still and bind his wounds, but Nagasena has not yet failed in a hunt and he does not intend to fail in this one. Sweat pours down his face. His features are drained of colour, but he keeps going. He leaves a line of smeared crimson in his wake.

Nagasena pulls himself through the doors into the courtyard. It is brightly lit,

and the black-skinned automata stand motionless. The night-blooming flowers bend and flap in a roaring downdraught.

The building howl of engines comes from a double-rotored tiltjet sitting on a raised platform cantilevered from the villa's outer walls. Severian sits at the flyer's controls, with Vadok Singh slumped next to him. Nagasena shields his eyes against the hurricane-force propwash that billows dust into the air. He draws his volkite pistol.

Proximity protocols might keep the automata from engaging, but Nagasena has no such restrictions.

The rotor nacelles angle downwards and the tiltjet lifts into the night.

Holding the pistol is almost too much for Nagasena. Sweat drips in his eyes and his limbs tremble with the effort of holding it straight. He will get one shot, two if he is lucky.

His first shot stabs into an engine, a bright beam that fuses components and blows hydraulic lines. His second misses.

But one was enough.

The engine coughs smoke and something inside explodes with a fearsome bang that rips the rotor assembly from the side of the tiltjet. The nacelle drops onto the villa's gateway and its sculpted structure is obliterated with a shriek of buckling metal and cracking stone. Broken pieces of rotor blades whip through the courtyard, beheading automata and scything others down like deserters before a firing squad. Nagasena buries his head in his hands as the nacelle explodes and the spinning tiltjet slams down next to it. The impact collapses the flyer's structure, its spine broken and the remaining engine spitting black smoke and screaming with grinding rotors.

Nagasena crawls towards the downed flyer and uses its buckled prow to pull himself upright. Through the shattered ruin of the canopy, he sees Vadok Singh is still unconscious, but relatively unscathed.

Severian is pinned in the pilot's seat, his legs broken by the crushed avionics panel. With a little time he could free himself, but Nagasena has the volkite pistol aimed at his head.

The Legion warrior sees the gun, but Nagasena does not shoot.

Instead, he asks: 'You were one of the Crusader Host, yes?'

'I was,' answers Severian. 'I stood on the walls of Terra as a symbol of the warriors fighting to reclaim the galaxy your ancestors let slip through their fingers. My brothers and I forswore the glories of campaigning to stand as honour guard on Terra. And what did we get for our sacrifice? Betrayal and

imprisonment!’

‘How long were you on Terra?’ asks Nagasena.

‘One hundred and seventy-seven years.’

‘Then you never became a Son of Horus.’

‘We were the foremost of the Emperor’s Legions,’ says Severian. ‘None could match our tally of compliance. I am a Luna Wolf, and my loyalty is beyond question.’

‘A lot can happen in two centuries,’ said Nagasena. ‘Hearts can change.’

‘Mortal hearts, not Legion hearts,’ spits Severian, looking him right in the eye. ‘So if you’re going to kill me, get on with it.’

‘Goodbye, Severian,’ says Nagasena, pulling the trigger.

The volkite pistol is an artificer-crafted relic of a bygone age, a weapon that has never once failed. Its workings are a mystery to him, but its lethality is beyond question, as is its reliability.

But this time, the pistol does not fire.

Before either Nagasena or Severian can react to the misfire, the arc-lights of the villa are snuffed out and a shriek of jets sounds overhead. A host of aircraft descend on columns of stab-lights. Nagasena shields his eyes as a score of grey-armoured soldiers descend through billowing winds on zip lines. Nagasena does not recognise them, for the firelight illuminates no insignia or rank markings upon their uniforms.

Their equipment is high-end tech, powerful hellguns, ablative shock-armour and full-visored helms with integral combat-augmetics. They quickly surround the downed tiltjet with their guns aimed squarely at Severian’s head and heart.

None of the soldiers speak, and Nagasena slides down the buckled fuselage of the flyer as the last of his strength bleeds out of him. Movement draws his eye, and he lifts his weary head. Through the burning gateway walks a dark man, clad in a hooded robe and flanked by a dozen slender women in gold, form-fitting armour. The red and ivory of their helm-plumes twist in the thermal vortices.

They are the Sisters of Silence, and there can be only one reason they are here.

The dark man pulls back his hood, revealing a tense, patrician face, framed by long white hair pulled in a scalp-lock. His eyes are old, perhaps the oldest Nagasena has ever seen, and a pale light dances in them like snow falling through moonbeams.

‘Lord Malcador?’ asks Nagasena.

The Regent of Terra nods and says, ‘Your pistol, Yasu. Point it in the air if you please.’

Nagasena does so, and as soon as it is vertical a thin beam of incandescent energy cuts the night. The tension in Malcador's face visibly relaxes and colour returns to his features.

'The mechanisms of the volkite are complex and require a great deal of effort to confound,' says Malcador. 'Even for one such as I.'

'You prevented my gun from firing?'

'I did, for I have need of the Luna Wolf,' says Malcador as a group of the grey soldiers carry Vadok Singh from the wreckage and into the villa. Another group free Severian with cutting gear and las-torches. His weight is enormous, and it takes six of them to lift him clear. His genhanced physique will be dulling the agony of his broken legs, but the pallor of his skin is testament to his pain. The Sisters of Silence surround Severian, and his face betrays a strange revulsion at the presence of the mute order.

Between them, they bear the wounded Space Marine up to the landing platform, where a black aircraft with a non-reflective hull descends from the darkness. The craft hovers just above the platform, and an assault ramp extends from its centre section. The silent sisterhood take Severian aboard, the assault ramp is retracted and the black ship rises on a near-silent repulsor field.

Nagasena groans and Malcador waves a pair of soldiers to his side. They have no markings, but bind his wounds with the expertise of battlefield medicae. One man readies a hypo of pain balm, but Nagasena shakes his head.

'Lord Dorn wanted Severian dead,' he says. 'Why do you need him alive?'

Malcador turns, and the firelight from the burning flyer gives his features a harsh, calculating appearance: a regicide grandmaster whose pieces are living beings and who knows full well the cost of the decisions he takes.

'We are at war, Yasu, a war for our very survival,' says Malcador. 'Lord Dorn fights his battles with guns and warriors. I wage a war of greater subtlety – a *silent* war, if you will, and I require men of singular talents to fight it.'

'What talent does Severian have that brings the Sigillite looking for him?'

'The Luna Wolf is a unique individual,' says Malcador. 'A latent psyker whose powers are so instinctual he does not even realise he has them.'

'A psyker?'

Malcador nods. 'One whose powers were only truly awakened when Magnus the Red sent his, shall we say, ill-advised message to Terra. In the years since then, Severian's innate abilities have grown into something quite special, oh yes, quite special indeed.'

'Years?' asks Nagasena. 'It was the Crimson King's psychic attack that allowed

the prisoners to escape from Khangba Marwu. That was only a few days ago.'

Malcador nods, then sees Nagasena's confusion. 'Ah, yes, I can see how it would appear that way from the outside, but Magnus sent his warning about Horus to Terra *two years ago*. It almost ripped the Palace apart, but the Emperor's wards were able to contain it from escaping. A host of psykers from the Hollow Mountain attempted to dissipate that enormous reservoir of power before it broke the psychic levees, but the energies Magnus unleashed eventually overcame them. And the entire world felt the results of that. But mark my words, it could have been worse, a lot worse.'

Nagasena tries to process this information, but the pain from his wounds is overwhelming his thought processes. He feels a jab in his thigh and calming warmth spreads through him.

'Lord Dorn will want to know of my hunt,' he says. 'What will I tell him?'

'Leave me to worry about Rogal,' chuckles Malcador.

'And Singh? What will he tell of this night's events?'

'Vadok Singh has an impressionable psyche,' says Malcador. 'He will remember what I need him to remember.'

'You would lie to Lord Dorn?' asks Nagasena.

Malcador shakes his head and says, 'Rogal and I have somewhat differing views on the means by which we must fight Horus. He has his knights, and I will soon have mine. Where his will blaze with fire and fury, my grey angels will move unseen through the Imperium. Severian will be part of that.'

Malcador's eyes bore into Nagasena, and he hears the Sigillite's next words echoing in the farthest reaches of his mind.

'And so will you.'

Severian faces his pursuer

ARMY OF ONE

Rob Sanders

Through the super-chilled methalon mist – a face.

It burns into my brain through the neural link. That face. A face I know…

I blunder through my nightmares. The realm of the half-remembered, a labyrinth of nonsensical gloom.

I am at once alone, a shanty urchin shivering in the squalor and shadow of the mighty primus hive. The chemical stench of the drosshill stings my nostrils, as once it did.

I snort and find myself a bag-of-bones youth, trampled in the crush of the Imperial Army recruitment drive amid whispers of a great war coming to Proxima Apocryphis. The Apocryphadi Hort will play its noble part. I wait three days in an unruly line, however, just to hear the caustic laughter of the subaltern and his watchdog sergeant. I turn to walk away.

I storm straight into the cacophony of gunfire. The underhive, running with the Thunderbloods. I taste the copper thrill of a firefight, the stub rounds flying and stiletto blades flashing amongst the rust-choked palisades. This is Tritus Falls. We're in Gundog territory – and by *we* I mean me and Fluke. I remember the hot passage of the betrayer's shot through my back-flesh and the scrape of his fleeing footsteps as he left me for dead. Left me to the Gundogs. To the brutality of Marshal Corquoran and his hive enforcers. To the solitary madness of a two-by-two standing-cell in the cramped incarcetoria. To bicep-building hard labour on the spire construction chain-crews.

From the nosebleed heights I am bagged, bought and dragged to a cell once more. A slave-cage. A holding pen for one of primus hive's many gladiatorial pits. I am an animal that lives only to bring death to others. An animal that

catches the eye of one Baron Chravius Blumolotov – bloated nephew of the equally bloated primus and planetary Lord-Governor. He attends my cell at night – when my bloody work is done – and runs his fat fingers through my gore-clotted hair. An inbred's thanks. A fiend's mercy.

'My loyal subject,' he soothes.

But once more my blood finds its price. An offworlder's offer even the broken baron can't refuse.

A long, long darkness away, I rediscover my dread in agonies and desecrations of the flesh no pit fighter or ganger could ever dream of inflicting. I find… the Clade and their torturous gift of a new existence. My body becomes their work of dark art: a surgical sculpture of genetic and cybernetic augmentation. Hypertrophic muscular barbarism, draped across a broken, restructured, then reinforced endoskeletal frame. I become for them a torrent of chemical warfare. My blood curdles and my veins broil with combat drugs and infusions of such enslaving potency that I am doomed never to know life without them. Psycho-indoctrination shatters whatever is left of me hiding within the Clade's monstrous creation. I am catastrophe. I am cold rage. I am wanton destruction – distilled and directed. A living weapon to be deployed.

I am Eversor.

Only then do I meet the architect of my deadly design. The one they call the Sigillite. He instils in my multi-hearts the depths of an Emperor's love and the abyssal hatred I must hold for his enemies. From his lips I hear my name spoken for the first time in a seeming eternity.

'Ganimus…'

Through the neurolink he shows me that face. The face I know. 'Ganimus…' the Sigillite says. 'This man is now counted amongst our enemies. He is the Warmaster's pawn. A faithless heretic. You must end this man, Ganimus – and all who stand with him.'

The super-chilled methalon mist clears.

Cryo-suspension is itself suspended. I hear the howl of atmospheric descent tearing at the pod plating as I drop like a bomb, like a thunderbolt, like the Emperor's vengeance through the lead-scorched skies. Impact jolts me from my mission-nightmare. The cortex downlink is complete. My assignment is a mind-crippling master that must be obeyed. My target is everything – he draws me with the irresistible gravity of a star. The unquenchable rage is all my own.

I rip my way out of the pod's plating as if it were a metal womb. My midnight bodyglove barely contains my gruesome potential. Pumped to monstrosity – a

grotesque, hewn from flesh and hate – I step once more out onto the ash of Proxima Apocryphis. Out into the shadow of the primus hive and the chill gloom I once called home. I draw my executioner pistol from my belt and extend the hypodermic fingertips of my toxin-primed neuro-gauntlet.

Through the optics of my skull helmet I see the Horusian banners flying from the palace spire. The Warmaster's single eye, watching my assassin's approach. One boot in front of the other – each stride growing with speed and fury – up through the drosshill slums. And then the killing begins. And it doesn't stop.

I feed on death. Hivers, factory menials and warring gangers – all die before my bloody path. I sate my appetite for destruction. Smoke stacks fall, factories collapse, infernos rage. Like a beast, I tear through the enforcers despatched to drop me before bringing battle to the traitor hortmen of the Apocryphadi Third. In the habs I become the great war they've got coming to them, slaughtering simple soldiers in their droves before ripping the heart out of their heretic command. I leave the Warmaster naught but dumbfounded youth and the craven dead. I explode up through the spire palaces like a rising monster of the deep. Awash with the blue blood of my betters, I tear the rich and powerful limb from limb, until finally I am granted a rare audience with the primus Lord-Governor.

That face. The face I know.

'I am the Emperor's loyal subject,' Chravius Blumolotov blubs, baron no more.

'No,' I whisper. 'But I am.'

My voice trembles. I am beyond words now. I can no longer contain the carnage I am about to wreak. I am Eversor. And I become vengeance.

THE GATES OF TERRA

Nick Kyme

‘We have not always seen eye to eye, you and I,’ said one. He had a cultured voice, ageing but redolent with power. The cadence of a statesman or a political negotiator. In the ancient days of Old Earth, the Romanii Empire would have employed such men as spymasters. ‘But here we stand fighting a war on two fronts, our purpose aligned at last.’

‘Our purpose has ever been the same,’ said the other. His timbre was much deeper and it put the first speaker in mind, as it always did, of a stone-clad vault. There was no compromise in his tone. It, like him, was solid and unyielding. And yet, the other was asking for just that. Compromise. ‘It is our methods that differ.’ There was power here too, but martial rather than esoteric. He exuded strength, this one; strength and intimidation.

‘Immediacy versus longevity, the two need not be mutually exclusive. Wars are won with more than bolters and blades.’ He was just a man, the first speaker, a lesser being than the titan towering over him, but his presence was the equal of the other’s physical stature. ‘But we are in agreement?’ he asked, ensuring the warrior understood the precise nature of their compact. To do anything other could potentially undermine everything they sought to achieve in the breaking of their Father’s law. ‘Since Nikaea, things have changed.’

The warrior’s silence suggested his discomfort at the plan, but he slowly nodded.

‘We do this for the new Imperium,’ said the first speaker. ‘The ends justify the means. We are talking about survival.’

Again silence, then the slightest frown cracked the warrior’s craggy countenance. He wanted to be away from this place, to be back at the walls

where his unique gifts could be best employed. This praetorian was not one given to skulking in shadows and talking in whispers.

'Our first priority must be stopping the fleet from breaching our atmosphere. If we can halt them there, we can defeat them. Horus Lupercal might never reach the walls.' The first speaker narrowed his eyes, suggesting they both knew that was a very unlikely scenario.

'My brother…' It was hard to say, and the warrior's lips curled when he used the word. Atrocities beyond comprehension, fratricide on a terrible scale had soured respect and killed any bonds of brotherhood between them. Barely daring to admit it even to himself, the praetorian wanted Horus to breach the cordon so he could crush him against the gates. Gauntleted hands became fists, the jaw locked and words slipped through a portcullis of clenched teeth. 'He will reach the wall.'

'Then we must use every weapon at our disposal. To do anything else would result in defeat for mankind.'

The warrior exhaled, long and deep, as if all his misgivings and reservations could be expelled with a single breath. 'I am uncomfortable with this.'

'Of course you are. This is why I need your confidence. This is why it had to be only you that knew about it. We do not tread lightly over our Father's edicts.'

'He is not your father.'

'He is Father to all of us, lord praetorian, is He not?'

Meeting the statesman's gaze, the warrior's voice sank to an abyssal whisper.

'He must never know.'

Something was seeping from his ear. It ran down the lobe and across his cheek until it touched the hard floor underneath him. Twisting and coiling inside his mind, faint echoes of its intrusion lingered in his psyche like the shreds of a half-remembered dream. Serpentine and insidious, it left a cooling trail in its wake. It was warm at first, and carried a metallic stink.

Like armoured shutters, Arcadese's eyes snapped open. Blood was seeping from his ear.

I am wounded.

But he could not recall any battle where he had sustained injury.

Clad in pitted battleplate, he knew he was a warrior, felt it in the slow returning strength of his arm, the martial instincts flooding his brain with action and counter-action, the pulse of adrenaline urging him to move.

Legiones…

Pushing up onto his knees, the split ceramite of his armour shrieked a warning and he felt the pain of his injuries anew. Agony flared down his side, white-hot and angry. He crushed it down, wiped the blood from his scarred face with a gauntleted hand and rose to his feet.

'Report.' His voice sounded alien, cracked and rasping from lack of use. Instinct compelled the word. It was all Arcadese had to go on. Stone walls, buttressed and adamantium-reinforced, enfolded him. This place was strange and yet familiar.

'Holding, lord-captain,' a warrior in cobalt-blue power armour replied. He carried the Ultima upon his left pauldron; the mark of Guilliman's Legion, the same as Arcadese. This warrior was his company brother, but he could not remember his name.

'Lieutenant…' he managed, recognising the rank markings on his battleplate. 'Help me to my station.'

'At once, lord-captain.'

Thunder sounded within the confines of the fortress, booming from the two pairs of macro-cannons emplaced in the fortress' walls far to the left and right of Arcadese's command throne. Each was manned by a company brother, Ultramarines whom Arcadese should know but did not recognise.

Sitting down, the control ports of the throne jacking in to his armour, he tried to capture some sense of the reality around him, but it was indistinct. The 'now' of the moment was visceral, tangible, but possessed no context. Like pieces of an image resolving through a haze, Arcadese began to assemble the disparate elements of his situation.

I have been wounded, he knew. *A head injury.*

Through a broad vertical slit directly in front of him, a distant battle was being fought. Massed ranks of infantry and armoured columns ploughed across a killing field on a collision course with a slew of drop pods, descending to earth on contrails of fire. Even with the limited view afforded through the vision slit, Arcadese had never seen so many.

Not since Ullanor…

And back then the spears of fire had been his allies, in days of glorious war when purpose was just and the enemy clear. Jealously and betrayal, the canker of deep-seated fraternal rivalry, had muddied all that.

Pain flashed again, but this was a relic, a phantom dredged from memory. Acutely, he was reminded of the crude bionics that supported over half his body.

'Lord-captain,' uttered Lieutenant, standing ramrod straight to the immediate

right of Arcadese's command throne as he pointed with a gauntleted finger.

Arcadese followed and, as if it was being revealed to him for the first time, he noticed the bank of viewscreens around the vertical slit.

On several of the display screens he saw the blue-green orb of Terra and knew then how close the war had come. They stood at the last gate.

'The Warmaster's vanguard has breached the outer Imperial cordon,' Lieutenant concluded.

Events were moving swiftly, far quicker than Arcadese could comprehend at first. Gaps interrupted his sense of continuity, like he was part of the edited précis of a mission briefing – only, he was living the mission in that moment and had no recollection of the omissions.

Head wound must be retarding my cognition.

Mentally, he shook it off.

A fleet of starships crept onto the viewscreen. Vast behemoths, swathed in metres-thick armour and cocooned by flickering void shields, they shrugged off the ineffectual enemy flak batteries with disdain. They moved slowly but relentlessly, as if snagged on the darkness of real space, but knifing through the void with keen inexorability. Weapon arrays flashed across their flanks, and forward-arc lances spat long beams of destructive fury.

'All weapons, focus fire on the lead vessel,' said Arcadese, voice grating but mind sharpening with the immediacy of a threat. 'Gunners one through four, alter trajectories…' he checked the atmospheric position of the lead ship using the instrumentation at his disposal – like the viewscreens, he had only just noticed the control console, 'to marked coordinates.'

Shrieking servos presaged the movement of the guns. Ammo-hoppers cycled furiously, pouring a ready supply of super-heavy shells into their vast mags.

A quartet of ranging targeting locks combined into a single reticule.

Despite his injuries, Arcadese braced his hands upon the command console and stood up, disengaging the control jacks in the process. Green monochrome shed from the bank of viewscreens underlit his war-ravaged face.

'Fire!'

A dense wave of noise and the actinic stench of expelled munitions accompanied the cannonade.

Multiple hits registered against the front-arc shields of the lead cruiser. Voids already under assault from a shoal of allied frigates on intercept courses shimmered, flickered once and crumpled.

Sustained barrage from the macro-cannons ripped a line of explosions across

the nose and underbelly of the cruiser, which yawed badly like a jackknifed freighter on an oil slick. Slipping out of formation, it slewed across the other enemy vessels in the line. Unable to halt their brutal momentum, the other cruisers collided with the stunned body of the stricken lead ship. Silent fire roared through real space, lighting a beacon that was devoured in seconds.

A moment later and the lead ship's reactor went critical, unleashing a nuclear flare as bright as star-death, consuming the vessels surrounding it.

It was the mortal spark of a flotilla, and brought a savage smile to Arcadese's features as he shielded his eyes against the flash.

Magnesium white was fading when a vox-unit built into the command console crackled and the voice of a warrior-king issued forth, cutting short the Ultramarines' shouts of victory.

'*Warriors of the Ardent Reef, this is Rogal Dorn. The Warmaster comes, knocking at our gates. You are the vanguard, your body its bricks, your blood its mortar. Hold fast for as long as you can. I honour you, each and every one, for your sacrifice. Praetorians all, your names shall live on into eternity. Man the last gate and do it with defiance in your hearts and a clenched fist. Give the Arch-traitor nothing. Make him pay for every metre with blood. We stand as one, unified in purpose. In the Emperor's name and for the survival of Terra, hold.*'

Lord Dorn himself was watching, and Arcadese would follow his order as if it had been given by his own primarch.

Taking his attention away from the debris of the sundered vessels above, his gaze alighted on the battlefield below.

Infantry cohorts, each hundreds strong, had engaged the first wave of landed warriors. Even supported by a host of battle tanks, the traitor legionaries were tearing them apart. An arterial flash of crimson against white-and-blue battleplate revealed the allegiance of the warriors battering at their doors, and Arcadese fought down a cold chill of despair at that knowledge.

'Berserkers let slip their leash…' he muttered.

Lieutenant seemed not to hear or care. Possessed of no anima, he was like a suit of armour.

A retinal display flicked down over Arcadese's eye from a command circlet he only just realised he was wearing, and he brought up the armoured face of each of the Ultramarines leading one of the Army cohorts.

Names eluded him; they were merely 'brother-veteran' defined by suffix, Alpha through Kappa.

'Withdraw and consolidate,' he barked into the feed, before distributing specific

orders to each brother-veteran in turn. By degrees, the combined defenders began a fighting retreat, tightening their formation around the strongest remaining cohorts and allowing the others to form the rearguard. Tank battalions were sacrificed valiantly to stall the advance of the enemy warriors, ripped to armoured husks in a cascade of incendiaries and sawed metal.

'Intensify fire by ranks,' Arcadese continued, assessing and reassessing the conflict through the vertical slit and viewscreens. 'Do not engage directly.'

Against the berserk warriors, keeping them at arm's length was the only hope of forestalling a massacre.

Hold fast for as long as you can, the words came back to him.

Casting his eye skywards for a moment, Arcadese saw a flotilla of Imperial ships commanding the scrap of real space above. He turned to his gunners.

'Bring ordnance down on the rear ranks, thin their numbers, and we'll roll over what's left.'

The macro-cannons altered alignment again and a series of pulsing reports rang throughout the fortress.

Through the vertical slit, Arcadese witnessed the hammering of the first enemy wave. It was split apart by the barrage, fading dust and smoke revealing the heaped corpses of warriors he had once called ally. Their deaths did little to salve the pain in his heart, but they bolstered the Army cohorts who massively outnumbered the attackers now. The ground battle turned into a stalemate.

'Finely done, my lord,' said Lieutenant. 'The enemy are contained.'

His tone lacked personality, as if the response was merely programmed.

'For now, brother,' Arcadese replied.

The vox-unit crackled again before anything further could be said, warning of approaching vessels in the region of space over which they stood sentinel.

A glance at the viewscreen revealed a much larger fleet. One vessel in particular stood out from the rest, leading the line.

Vengeful Spirit…

Horus' flagship was immense, a jagged spike of black against black, bristling with guns and growling with the sentience of a barely caged beast. A host of other cruisers and monstrous capital ships surrounded it, but all were dwarfed by the Warmaster's battle-barge.

This was the instrument of Horus' will in the void, the darkling vessel that embodied his graven pact with Chaos and the promise of omnipotence should he deliver this last bastion of mankind to its Ruinous gods.

When it spoke, it did so in a roar with the sound of an array of guns powerful

enough to kill worlds. The *Vengeful Spirit* issued a single word from the mouths of its many cannons, and that word was ‘doom’.

The Imperial intercept flotilla vanished in a hot storm of fire and silence, blown away like ash on the solar wind. Real space throbbed with the violence of their destruction, sore and hurting with the wound inflicted upon it by Horus’ flagship.

For once, Arcadese hesitated.

How can we prevail against such unbounded fury?

But he was an Ultramarine, and if he knew anything it was duty. He had a line to hold, for the Emperor, for Terra and all the many souls of mankind that would be sacrificed to thirsting gods should he fail.

‘Cycle guns up. Rake the escorts, pick them apart. We’ll snarl up the flagship in the dead hulks of its own fleet.’

The *Vengeful Spirit* was still too distant to fire on. At such extreme range, a ship that size with its armour and shields would shrug off the cannonade like an insect sting. Its outriding vessels were a different prospect. They had burned engines to sweep in front of the goliath flagship, like lesser predator-fish swarming around a leviathan of the deep. Arcadese wanted to create a graveyard of broken vessels for the *Vengeful Spirit* to wade through. Even if they could slow the flagship down that would be a victory of sorts.

‘Sustained and heavy barrage,’ he ordered. ‘Do not cease fire until you run empty.’

The fusillade had lasted less than a minute when the fortress was hit by one of Horus’ larger retinue ships. Arcadese was lifted off his feet in the resulting blast wave. Chips of rockcrete stung his face where they pierced skin and flesh. One embedded itself in his jaw but he ignored it. He rolled, vertiginously, failing to grip the edge of the command throne as he was smashed over it. Fire, smoke and noise filled his senses. Somewhere, he heard a choked scream.

Gunner is dead.

Up on his feet faster this time, Arcadese shook off the disorientation and peered through fading smoke to see his worst fears realised. A broken puppet of a warrior slumped half-out of his weapon harness, his body bifurcated along the waist. Most of the left side of his skull was crushed. His remaining eye stared from a bloodied face that had once been noble but was now horrific.

Lieutenant had vanished from sight in the hellstorm. Arcadese didn’t know if the Ultramarine was alive or dead. Debris lay everywhere, wreathed with choking dust.

A chunk of fortress wall had collapsed inwards and the roar of battle outside

grew louder with its absence. Charred-flesh stink and the acerbic tang of incendiary heat bled in on a turbulent wind.

After a brief cessation, the other guns resumed their barrage. On a cracked viewscreen, its image intermittent and crazed with static, the vessel responsible for wounding the fortress was broken apart.

A fourth gun, still operational, lay silent.

The *Vengeful Spirit* drew closer, battering the shattered vessels aside without slowing. They'd have to target it soon, attempt the impossible and bring down or at least slow a ship that could rip apart their fortress and the asteroid into which it was hewn with a single, desultory burst of its guns.

Arcadese staggered over to the stalled cannon, hauled out the dead gunner and climbed into the firing harness.

A targeting crosshair overlaid his vision, its macro-zoom enabling him to pick out specific vessels powering through the void. Through the azure glow of the targeting matrix's filter, he saw a furious space battle unfolding. A number of immense Imperial Emperor-class ships had moved to blockade the route of the *Vengeful Spirit* and its personal vanguard. Star flashes, smudges of ultra-light, signalled the unleashing of their forward lances.

A large frigate was transfixed by several beams concurrently and exploded into a supernova, radiating heat-death in an invisible fog from its burned reactors.

Lining up a cruiser wallowing in the sundered vessel's wake on his reticule, subconsciously aware of the ammo count to the extreme right of his screen, Arcadese gripped the firing triggers.

A steady staccato drummed through his body as the harness failed to fully dampen the recoil from the massive gun. No mortal could have used the macro-cannons; their bones would be reduced to splinters, their innards rendered to soup in a single salvo.

Arcadese endured it, revelled in the cathartic satisfaction of seeing a tear open up in the cruiser's aft. Drooling men and fuel, it slowed and fought for retaliatory firing solutions. Three more macro-cannons stitched lines of super-heavy shells into its flanks, burst open entire decks, collapsed towers and ripped open full sections of armour plating as the voids capitulated utterly.

'Bring it down!'

Arcadese was bellowing now, venting his frustration at the certainty that this was but a forestalling of all their deaths.

A rippling chain reaction broke the cruiser into several pieces, now little more than flotsam awash on a dark and uncaring ocean, a tomb of flash-frozen heretics

cast to oblivion.

Tracking that sea of utter black, Arcadese found and locked on to another ship. A snap-fired salvo collapsed a few shields, broke up some comms towers before a heavy grip on his shoulder pulled him away from the myopic universe to which he was a willing prisoner.

‘Our ground forces are failing, my lord.’

Lieutenant was still alive. Bloody-faced with a jagged line of crimson across his cheek that was bleeding onto his neck and rimming the edge of his gorget, but alive.

‘I can take the gun, sir,’ he added.

Arcadese nodded, yanked up the firing harness to let Lieutenant in, and went to the command console.

‘How?’

Where only moments ago the battle was bogged down in a time-eating stalemate, now the traitors had regrouped, their forces inexplicably replenished. They were losing again. More than that, something else moved amongst the warring throngs. Red-fleshed with eyes black like darkest flint, a baleful aura exuding off their brawny bodies in a visceral steam, Arcadese had no words to describe these… *monsters*.

Entire phalanxes of men, those who had lost their legionary captains, fled in the face of the horrors. Bolter fire swept them up, tore them apart like threshed wheat. Those loyal warriors still fighting were hard-pressed to last much longer before a full-scale rout saw the end to their resistance.

Arcadese engaged the comm-bead in his ear.

‘How many men do we have as a garrison?’

Lieutenant answered perfunctorily.

‘Fifty Legiones Astartes and a hundred times that in Army auxiliaries. They await you in the lower deep, before the gate.’

‘I did not ask if…’ Arcadese let it go. Lieutenant wasn’t listening any more. His final words to Arcadese haunted him as he walked to the lifter plate that would convey him to the lower deep and the last defenders of the fortress.

‘It has been an honour to serve with you, my lord.’

The reply sounded hollow, even untruthful. ‘And you, Lieutenant.’

Shrouded in shadows, dust motes spiralling earthwards with the recoil from the macro-cannons, the lower deep was a vast and echoing space. In its centre, standing to attention in a pool of lambent light, was a square of over five thousand men.

Ultramarines officers stood head and shoulders above the Army soldiers, bolters locked across their chests. When the lifter plate touched down Arcadese realised he was wearing his full panoply of war, including cloak and laurel. He perceived the warriors he was about to command to their deaths through the red retinal lenses of a battle-helm. Clasped to his left thigh was an ornate scabbard; on the right, holstered and fully loaded, was a bolt pistol. The command circlet was gone. A servitor-armourer that hadn't been with him when the lifter plate descended was by his side now and bowed humbly.

'Serf, my blade,' he said, holding out his hand for the servitor-armourer to place his sword in it.

The hilt felt strong, it lent strength to Arcadese's arm as he touched it.

'I know my purpose now,' he muttered to the creature, which backed away as Arcadese stepped off the lifter plate and into the fortress' lowest level. He didn't question, for nothing he could have asked or had an answer to would matter in the moments to follow.

Instead, he merely asked, 'Are you ready to make your sacrifice with me and die in the name of Terra?'

'For Throne and Emperor!' over five thousand voices replied in shouted unison.

Arcadese nodded and found steel in the eyes of every one of these warriors.

'Open the last gate,' he ordered, and the gates ground open noisily, letting in the light and the blood and the death…

Time… *slipped*. It had happened before, but this was the first occasion when Arcadese could remember it happening and notice it.

Five thousand had become five hundred, surrounded in the middle of the battlefield by a baying throng of beasts shaped like men and men shaping to become beasts.

Daemons all…

Such a curious, archaic word. Yet it felt apt.

In seconds, five hundred became fifty, so only Arcadese and his legionary brothers remained.

Wasn't I supposed to be one of the last?

Aside from the Crusader Host, the rest of Guilliman's Legion was last reported to be on Calth. The incongruity of his unknown company brothers, the faces without names, the warriors bereft of diversity or personality, only just struck Arcadese in those final moments.

The stench of burning flesh assaulted his nostrils even through the grille of his battle-helm as the power sword slid from a traitor's chest; a second blow cut

head from neck. A third blocked the thrust of another assailant. Churning teeth met superheated adamantium in a collision of sundered metal. A point-blank bolt pistol salvo took out part of the berserker's face. He fell and behind him loomed a creature wrenched from hell.

It flickered incorporeally, flitting between realities, preternaturally fast. It was rage, distilled and fashioned into bestial flesh. It was horned, and bayed with a resonant cry of promised damnation.

High above the battlefield, a shadow grew over the force dome that surrounded the fortress-asteroid in hermetic void-shielding. Slow-moving, it slid with a predator's ease across the canvas of space, eclipsing entire nebulae.

The beast before Arcadese was emboldened by the vast ship's presence and the suppressed despair of the Ultramarine who looked upon it and recognised the manner of his death.

As the first of the *Vengeful Spirit*'s gun batteries opened up, birthing miniature suns against the atmospheric blister cocooning the fortress-asteroid, Arcadese still dared to believe they could resist. Power sword met stinking hell-glaive, releasing a shower of black sparks into the air as Arcadese parried the beast. He missed a second blow and felt agonising heat seize his body.

Laughing, the beast looked down and bade its enemy do the same.

Sulphurous breath washed over Arcadese in a burning fog as the daemon's mirth increased. Jutting from the Ultramarine's chest, a half-metre deep, was the hell-glaive.

Light was dying in Arcadese's eyes, the ring of cobalt he had forged around him from those fifty battle-brothers all but broken, just as another light was born overhead.

Opening up its awesome prow weapons, the *Vengeful Spirit* needed only to speak one final time before the force shield around the fortress-asteroid was overwhelmed.

Nucleonic fire rushed from heaven to meet him, bathing his world in pellucid white as Arcadese closed his eyes…

…only to awake again, drowning in darkness.

Blood tasted metallic in his mouth and he couldn't move. After a few seconds, Arcadese realised it was because he was strapped down.

Awareness was slow to come. His head itched, as if an insect swarm had run amok inside his skull, and his body was raw and tenderised. Judging by the solid walls, which only now resolved as he adjusted to the dark, he was being held in

some kind of cell. On his back, as if in repose, it was difficult to discern much more. Instinct suggested he was not alone, and he called out.

'Where am I?'

Peripherally, he was aware of a presence behind him, but it was foggy, as if somehow veiled.

The presence behind him didn't answer. Instead, an elliptical portal of light appeared, just visible if he peered down his face. Two figures, barely more than silhouettes, stood within its confines.

'Who are you? What is the purpose of my incarceration?' He'd been taken. Somehow he'd survived the nucleonic fire and become a prisoner of the enemy.

One of the observers was massive. Twice again as tall as Arcadese, he cast an immense shadow, black on black. Encased in hulking power armour, he emanated strength.

Horus…

Arcadese could not suppress a scowl or the snarl in his voice.

'Slay me now, hell-kite, and save your time.'

It was the other figure – much slighter, much smaller and clad in long robes – that answered.

'You are safe here, Brother Arcadese,' he said, his tone cultured and stately.

'Then release me.'

The armoured giant left the elliptical portal, disappeared somewhere into the background where Arcadese could not see him.

'I cannot.'

'I am a legionary captain of the Ultramarines, and if I am not a prisoner of war aboard this vessel you *will* let me go.'

'You are not on a ship, Ultramarine.'

'Then where–'

'That is not important. The important thing is that you are on the verge of passing the trial and returning to active duty.'

Arcadese's face contorted into an incredulous expression.

'I have already done so, commanding a fortress as part of the Ardent Reef. I was just…'

His thoughts were clouding, hard to grasp and hold on to.

'Are you? Is that where you've been all this time?' asked the robed figure.

Incredulity became anger.

'What is going on?' He pulled at the restraints keeping him in a supine position. 'And why am I strapped down? I died.'

‘Only in your mind, and the restraints are for your own protection.’

‘But how could you…?’ And like a lantern had been set ablaze inside his head, an ugly truth was revealed. ‘I am not alone in here. There is a psyker with me, one of us.’

‘One of *us*?’ The figure seemed not to acknowledge the disgust in Arcadese’s voice.

‘A Librarian,’ he stated flatly, consternation edging his tone. ‘Trawling through my memories, implanting scenarios… How else could you have muddied my thoughts, forced images into my psyche and made them seem real? What of the Nikaea edict, what of the Emperor’s will?’ he demanded.

‘Things have changed. Necessity forces us into compromise and hard choices. We have to be sure. I hope you can understand that.’

Arcadese was finding it hard to master his anger and indignation. ‘Sure of what?’

‘Of your ability to make sacrifices, function under pressure and do all that is necessary to achieve your mission even if that meant losing the battle and your life. You have been absent from the front line for many years. Even on Bastion you were merely a bodyguard.’

Bastion… Heka’tan died there. The Salamander’s face as he fell into the fire still haunts me.

The robed figured continued. ‘The training had to be harsh in order to test you sufficiently.’

‘Is that why I’m bleeding,’ Arcadese asked, ‘and strapped into this chair?’

‘The “scenarios” provoked by the Librarius are potent, they have to be to seem real. A side effect is that they can, and often do, manifest physical symptoms sympathetic to the mental ones experienced. There is nothing here that does not serve the greater goals of the Imperium.’

‘Then why are you hiding in shadows?’

‘Darkness aids the process. Besides, it wouldn’t matter if I weren’t.’

‘And the attack?’

‘Has not yet begun, but the Warmaster’s fleet could emerge from the warp at any moment. We must be ready, so there was no time for endless training. Utilising the Librarius provided expedient answers.’

The scowl on Arcadese’s face suggested he did not agree, but he found he couldn’t maintain his anger. Unconsciousness was crawling at the edge of his vision again, as a sensation of weightlessness took hold.

‘I am sorry,’ said the robed figure with genuine regret.

‘For what?’ Arcadese answered groggily.

‘For what I have to do next.’

Arcadese passed out on the chair, eyes flickering as he returned to unreality.

The robed figure nodded to the Librarian standing behind the slumbering Ultramarine. The psyker had his hand poised over Arcadese’s head. A nimbus of crackling psi-energy played about the psychic hood he wore.

‘Thank you, Brother Umojen.’

‘Lord Sigillite.’

As he retreated back into the observation chamber, Malcador met the steely gaze of the armour-clad giant.

‘His mind will be cleansed?’ asked the warrior.

Heavy gears sounded through the metal and the lozenge-shaped mag-lift began to ascend the rail on a plate of anti-gravitic power. Slowly, it rose higher and the cell began to shrink, revealing a second cell alongside it, and then a third, fourth…

‘I shall see to it personally,’ answered the Sigillite. ‘You should be smiling, lord praetorian. Arcadese will make a perfect commander upon the Ardent Reef.’

A hololithic image dominated much of the chamber that the giant warrior now approached and regarded. In grainy resolution, it described the slowly rotating orb of Terra and the thousands of defence asteroids which now surrounded it.

‘Even so,’ the warrior rumbled, ‘it will still not be enough.’

Malcador sighed, ‘No, it will not. In every projected scenario, Horus breaks the Reef apart.’ He paused before asking, ‘Are you willing to approve Captain Arcadese?’

The warrior exhaled a long and rueful breath. ‘Run it again,’ he said, turning from the hololith. ‘Run them all again.’

The mag-lift was still climbing. Hundreds of chambers were revealed, their subjects under psychic trance, each presided over by a Librarian from diverse Legions sent back to Terra by Captain Garro and his cohorts.

Malcador could feel the minds of each and every one, hear the distant psi-echo of battle in their thoughts. He had dreamed of the assault on Terra many times. And in every somnambulant vision it had not ended well.

‘As you command, Lord Dorn.’

Arcadese awoke to find blood trickling down the side of his face. He was injured, a head wound, but couldn’t recall any battle where he’d received it. A fortress surrounded him on all sides, and the rumble of cannon emplacements in

the walls brought him out of unconsciousness.

Pushing to his feet, he saw a battle-brother he didn't know.

'Lieutenant,' he said, recognising the Ultramarine's rank markings, 'report.'

GHOSTS SPEAK NOT

James Swallow

Made crystal and pewter by monochrome light, the *Velox* dropped silently into the bowl of Crater Swift, settling on the surface of Terra's moon. Puffs of lunar dust billowed gently in the low gravity, scattered by the retro-thrusters on the underside of the heavy gun-cutter.

Despite a name that in High Gothic conjured thoughts of speed and sleekness, the *Velox* was more akin in its design to a bolter or an engine part. She was not a lovely vessel, and did not have grace about her. The ship was a lesser cousin to the massive frigates that patrolled Terra's LaGrange points, a bulky craft that resembled an ingot of battered steel. But the *Velox* was carefully nondescript, forgettable, and that in itself was a kind of perfection.

Two halves of a thick dome emerged from the edges of Crater Swift, quickly rising to meet and form a roof over the basin. As they came together, air flooded into the sealed space. It was a wasteful, showy use of atmosphere, but as in many things so close to the seat of the Imperium, the presentation of these details was sometimes more important than the reality behind them.

A ramp unrolled from the *Velox'*s ventral hull, and presently three figures disembarked. Bringing up the rear were a man and a woman clad in tactical carapace shells, their armour not the dull green of the Emperor's army but a slate tone darker than the surrounding lunar regolith, highlighted with gold detail.

They carried themselves like professional soldiers, with a measure of swagger leavened by wariness, their hands never straying too far from the high-spec laspistols holstered at their hips. Both would have been more at ease carrying their usual shoulder arms, but their mission commander had insisted that they were to show decorum on Luna. Coming armed for war did not communicate the

required degree of respect.

The woman's name was Qelvyn; born on distant Shenlong, she was still new to the glitter and majesty of the inner Imperium, and she could not stop herself from looking through the dome to see the great tower rising up from the Sea of Crises beyond it. The Somnus Citadel shone like a bright dagger against the black sky.

Vasado was her male compatriot, and he too was daunted by what lay around him. But unlike Qelvyn, Vasado concealed his misgivings beneath a layer of practised disdain.

They exchanged looks as they reached the foot of the ramp and took defensive positions around the figure beneath the hooded black cloak who had led them here.

From the folds of that velvet mantle emerged strong, athletic hands. The head beneath the hood rose and the dark material rolled back of its own accord to reveal a woman's face.

In other circumstances, some would have called her a beauty, even with the faint tracery of a sword-cut scar visible across her cheek. But her eyes – dark chips of amber, forever narrowed in dismay – were those of a killer. Purple-black hair, once long and flowing but now close-cropped, framed her face. She wore a band of metallic cloth that sat across her high forehead.

The woman knew this place intimately. For years, it had been the closest thing she had to a home. In the halls of the Somnus Citadel, she had found something close to a family.

All gone now. Swept away in a tide of change forced upon her by circumstance, by her own sense of right and wrong. Coming back stirred a peculiar mix of emotions, all marbled with regret.

She did not allow any of that to show. She kept it locked away behind a schooled, steady expression, because she knew that they were being watched. A bow, then; she went down on one knee to the great red-gold sigil of the Imperial aquila that dominated the far wall of the crater-bay.

A moment later, a hatch in the stone wall spat vapour and rumbled open, to reveal a cohort of women in golden armour and chainmail. Many showed only the upper half or a quarter section of their faces behind gorget-grilles that resembled castle gates. All had swords and ornate guns at rest upon their hips.

The Sisters of Silence had decided to grace them with their presence.

They were the Emperor's most fearsome witch-seekers. A cadre of women recruited from across known space, taken from orphanages and trained to be

superlative killers. Their name came from their Oath of Tranquillity, a vow given freely on ascension from novice to full Sisterhood, never to speak aloud until their duty ended.

They were as vital to the Imperium as the great warlords of the Legiones Astartes, but for different reasons.

Each of the Sisters was the possessor of the Pariah gene, each a psychic null whose existence made no impact on the great unseen ocean of the warp, where the inchoate energy of all living spirits was said to reside. They were the antithesis to the gifted psykers who served as Navigators, astropaths and Librarians in the Emperor's name; their presence alone was enough to torment a being with psionic talents. Thus, they were the best equipped to hunt down and terminate any mind-witches and renegade psykers who might threaten the stability of the Imperium.

A few detached from the group and approached the *Velox.* Their leader sauntered more than she walked, a cruel smile playing on her lips. Her left eye was a bionic construct of azure glass and brassy metal, protruding from a face puckered by fire scarring. While the White Talon Sister-Vigilators who escorted her bore few items denoting rank, their leader had a heavy necklet and black steel torcs about her arms indicating high status. She was a Sister-Excrutiatus, one of the silent order's most zealous and ruthless agents. Her cadre were called when whole worlds needed to be scoured, in the extreme cases when a handful of deaths were not enough to purge the taint of witchery.

The scarred Sister halted in front of the hooded woman as she rose, and in a gesture that could be nothing other than mockery, tapped two fingers to the tip of her chin. The sign meant '*give voice.*'

A callow novice, who until this moment had been out of sight behind one of the Vigilators, slipped into view and cleared her throat. 'You are asked–'

I know what that means, child, the woman in the cloak responded. She gestured in thoughtmark, the intricate sign language used by the Sisterhood to communicate concepts of depth and import. *You are not needed here.*

'I…' The novice faltered. As she had not yet taken her oath, Sisters of her rank were often used as interpreters for the Silent Sisterhood to communicate with those outside their order. It was clear that the young woman had not been informed of who would be arriving aboard the *Velox.* 'You know our speech?'

She used to be one of us, signed the novice's commander. *Before her strength failed and she became an oath-breaker.*

'My strength is as firm as it ever was.' The words left the hooded woman's lips,

and she felt a strange thrill at speaking aloud in this place, after so many mute years of her life spent here. ‘My oath was altered, renewed… Never broken.’ Her voice had a rough, cracked quality to it, perhaps a legacy of decades of disuse. She reached up and tugged the headband away, revealing the same blood-red aquila tattoo on her forehead as that shared by the Vigilators. ‘My name is Amendera Kendel, and I come with the authority of Malcador the Sigillite and the right of my own actions. You would do well to remember that, Emrilia.’

The Sister-Excrutiatus glared at her for daring to use her forename in so casual a manner. A long time ago, Amendera Kendel and Emrilia Herkaaze had been friends, both plucked from worlds in the Belladone Reach, both excelling in their training as Silent Sisters.

But the passage of time and the constant struggle against witch-kind had put them on different paths. Where Kendel sought to perform her duties with honour and compassion, Herkaaze became consumed by a militant intensity beyond the secular remit of their order.

You should not have come back. Herkaaze’s hand tensed on the hilt of her sword, the other dancing in front of her face as she snapped out the words through her gestures. *You are not welcome here.* She glanced at the two soldiers at the foot of the gun-cutter’s ramp. *You or… Malcador’s Chosen.*

‘You are the lost one,’ murmured the novice, shock written across her face. ‘The Oblivion Knight who willingly departed the order to serve the Sigillite…’

‘There is a great deal more to it than that,’ Kendel said grimly.

The young Sister blurted out a question before she could stop herself. ‘Why did you do it?’

Kendel looked away, briefly meeting Herkaaze’s gaze. ‘Things change. Deeds are done and words are spoken that can never be called back.’ She closed her eyes, remembering another novice, another unanswerable question… And Herkaaze’s remorseless sword cutting down that young life to deny an unmade future. ‘It matters not. The only fact of importance is that I am here now with a mission of the utmost consequence.’

Herkaaze eyed her. *What errand has Malcador sent you on? The Sisterhood will not participate in his elaborate schemes.*

Kendel hesitated. Although the Sigillite was the Regent of Terra and the Emperor’s right hand, there were many who distrusted him, and some – like the Sister-Excrutiatus – who secretly considered the Emperor a divine being and Malcador as some kind of usurper-in-waiting. She frowned. ‘I am not here to engage with you,’ said Kendel. ‘I have need of the guests you hold in the citadel.

Take me to them.'

A noise escaped Herkaaze; a low grunt of derision. *I see no reason to accede to your demand.*

'Perhaps this will change your mind.'

Kendel pulled off the heavy battle glove on her left hand and held it up, palm facing the Sisters. On her pale skin there was a shimmering brand, scars made of liquid metal. The icon rendered there was a stylised letter 'I', with the suggestion of an all-seeing eye upon it.

'This is the mark and the authority of the Regent of Terra. I am his Agentia Tertius, and his words echo through mine.' She steeled herself, for the path she was about to start down would be hers alone if it brought failure. 'This matter bears the mantle of *tacitus bellum,* of a need most pressing and covert in nature. So I say once more, do as I ask… Or accept the consequences your obstruction will bring.'

Her former sister-in-arms took a step closer, until they were eye to eye. *You shamed the Storm Dagger cadre when you deserted us. But I was not sorry to see you go. If it were my choice, I would have you executed for your temerity.* Herkaaze leaned back, retreating. *We are the Emperor's blades, and we do His will. If this is wished, so be it. And if not…* She paused, then pointed up at the dome, directly towards the half-globe of Terra visible in the lunar sky. *He sees all.*

The Sister-Vigilators closed ranks and moved with Herkaaze as she strode away. Only the novice remained.

'What is your name, child?' asked Kendel.

The girl was plainly quite afraid of her. 'Novice-Sister Gathé Soteria.'

'Well, Gathé. My time is limited.' She nodded towards the hatchway that led to the Somnus Citadel. 'Show me to the Seventy.'

With the novice taking the lead, Kendel and the soldiers boarded a pneumatic tram that ferried them through dark tunnels to the Sisterhood's fortress. As they dropped into the catacombs beneath the citadel, Vasado leaned over and muttered to Qelvyn. 'You know what that was about?' He nodded towards Kendel and Soteria at the far end of the tram car.

Qelvyn gave him an arch look. 'I know bad blood when I see it.'

Vasado shivered. 'This place gives me the creeps.' He glanced out of a portal. 'Something here doesn't feel right.'

'I hear you,' the other soldier nodded. 'It's them. They're all *blanks.* The Sisters

are pariahs, and you know what that means.'

'They don't have souls.'

'If you believe in that kind of thing,' added the woman. 'Or it could just be the mind playing tricks.'

Vasado bristled. 'You look me in the eye and tell me your gut doesn't sit badly, being in this place.' When Qelvyn didn't counter, he nodded. 'Thought so.' He had seen the way that the *Velox*'s psyker pair – the demure astropath and the ship's Navigator – had reacted with open aversion to the arrival of Kendel aboard the gun-cutter. Both of them could barely stand to be in the same cabin as the former Oblivion Knight, and he wondered if the constant, slightly sickening sensation he felt now was a pale shade of whatever those with psionic gifts would experience.

Vasado was no stranger to discomfort. During his time in the Auxilia, he had spent months knee-deep in inhospitable places no sane person would ever have visited. But the constant, ominous pressure in the back of his head made him want to run back to the *Velox* where he could lock himself away along with the psykers. He took a long breath and shook it off.

The tram slowed to a halt, and he followed Qelvyn to her feet as a hatch slid back.

'They have annexed this level,' the novice was telling Kendel. 'It seemed the best solution to simply allow them to have it and interfere as little as possible in their affairs. For everyone's sake.'

The soldiers exited first, and Vasado's nostrils twitched. He smelt cordite and blood in the air. His hand was on his laspistol in an instant. 'Careful…'

The sound of steel on steel reached them, and Vasado realised that they had arrived in the middle of a fight.

The chamber before them was partly a vast natural cavern, partly an excavation cut by heavy industrial lasers. Someone had set up clusters of prefabricated habitat modules in groupings best suited to a forward military outpost. He saw a parade ground, a makeshift shooting range, dormitory blocks and the like. The ringing clamour of blades was coming from a fighting pit dug out of the rock, and about it Vasado saw a ring of great, hulking figures in body-gloves and robes.

'Legionaries…' murmured Qelvyn. 'Here?'

'The Seventy,' Kendel told her, stepping past. 'Although there are fewer left now. The name remains, as they have nothing else to designate them.' She marched towards the giant warriors and the duel they were spectating.

Qelvyn and Vasado quickly fell in step with Kendel, and Soteria came too, wringing her hands and fretting as they went.

Vasado sized up the Space Marines with all the wariness of a scavenger canid approaching a pack of apex predators. Even out of their powered armour, the Emperor's Angels of Death were impressive specimens. He had seen them many times growing up, and never lost the instinctive sense of respect that their kind instilled in him.

And yet, with the rebellion of Warmaster Horus and the turning of several of the Emperor's Legions to sedition's black banner, Vasado was acutely aware that there were many of these gene-engineered beings who were now his enemy. As his gaze raked over the ranks of the assembled warriors, he glimpsed something that made him freeze in his tracks.

Kendel turned back to him as Vasado pulled his gun, the weapon whining as it went into active mode. The sound caught the attention of a couple of the legionaries, who eyed him coldly.

'What are you doing?' said Qelvyn, her own hand on her pistol.

'You see what they are?' he hissed. 'Look there, the brands and Legion icons on their flesh!' As clear as day, many of the warriors had simple tattoos visible on their massive biceps that repeated the same symbol – a six-pointed star-burst crested by a white skull. 'The Fourteenth Legion! The *Death Guard!*'

Kendel stepped in front of Vasado. 'Aye, these are Mortarion's sons. They are warriors from a Legion that turned against Terra and bent the knee to the Warmaster… But they are not traitors.'

'Explain.' Vasado retreated a step, sensing Qelvyn at his side.

His thoughts raced. *What kind of madness has the ex-Sister dragged us into?* Since becoming one of Malcador's Chosen, he had come to understand that the Sigillite's missions were atypical – but until now, his only contact with those having fealty to Horus had been to kill them.

One of the legionaries detached from the group and surveyed them. 'The woman speaks the truth. We are loyal to the Emperor, as we have always been. Seventy of us, at first. We escaped the betrayal at Isstvan to bring word of the Warmaster's treachery to Terra.'

'And what of your brethren and your primarch?' Qelvyn rocked on her heels, ready to flee if she had to. 'What allegiance do you have to them?'

The warrior's eyes narrowed. 'Are we still of the Death Guard?' He shook his head. 'In all honesty, I do not know. That has been taken away from us.'

Kendel glanced at the soldiers. 'I was here at the end of their flight from horror.

I tell you, these men are right and true – perhaps the last of their Legion who are.'

'So *you* say,' Vasado retorted. 'If that's so, then why are *those* here?' He jerked a thumb back towards the pneumatic tram. Flanking the platform were two dormant gun-servitors, their cannons lowered for now but clearly placed to prevent anyone leaving the cavern.

The legionary's narrow, scarred face twisted in a grim sneer. 'In this day and age, trust is in short supply.'

'Put away your weapon,' Kendel ordered Vasado. 'Before you embarrass us further.'

He reluctantly complied, although the Death Guard seemed unconcerned by the whole exchange. As the heat of the moment faded, the soldier imagined how it might have gone if he had fired a shot. *Not in our favour,* he thought.

'I remember you.' The Death Guard addressed Kendel, no longer interested in the blade fight behind him. From the tempo of the clash, it seemed to be close to a violent climax. 'Now you speak. Much has changed.'

'For all of us.' Kendel looked around. 'I regret that Luna has become a prison for you and your battle-brothers.'

The warrior shrugged his broad shoulders. 'We have decided to look upon it as a form of detached duty. A sentinel watch that must be stood, if you will. We train and we meditate. But the Silent Sisters allow us only limited contact with the galaxy at large. So we wait.'

'For what?' asked Qelvyn.

'For the time when we are needed.' The Death Guard gave her a strange look, as if his answer was as obvious as the grey stone surrounding them. 'Our primarch will come to Terra, sooner or later. We will be there to greet our father and our errant kinsmen. On that day, we will have words.'

Vasado almost laughed at the warrior's dour understatement, but a healthy sense of self-preservation kept him quiet.

The warrior looked back at Kendel. 'I would ask, what news is there of our captain, and our kinsman Voyen? The Sisters say nothing.'

A frown grew on the woman's face. 'Nathaniel Garro now serves the Emperor and the Regent of Terra as I do, in missions of secrecy and import. Meric Voyen…' She trailed off.

'He left with a few of our number,' prompted the warrior. 'They did not return.'

'They will not,' said Kendel, after a moment.

'Ah.' The Death Guard gave a solemn nod, taking the bleak meaning from her

words. Vasado expected him to press for more information, but the legionary simply accepted the cold reality of the loss.

From the fighting pit there came a final, thunderous exchange of blows, followed by a great crunch of stone, and dust kicked up by the duel slowly settled. Even under the effect of the citadel's gravity-normalising field, the powdery lunar soil ghosted through the air like mist.

The spectating legionaries tapped their fists on their chests in a gesture of approval to the fighters, breaking ranks as the two combatants climbed out. The first of them, dark-skinned with a heavy brow, rose into view. Vasado winced as the legionary snapped his dislocated jaw back into place with a dull crack. He stalked away, and by his manner, the soldier knew immediately that this one had been the loser of the bout. The victor emerged – thickset and bull-necked, even by Space Marine standards – and gave a bellicose snort, a savage smirk playing on his lips.

But the expression fell away when he saw the new arrivals. 'Gallor! What are these?'

The Death Guard pushed past his brothers and strode over. Sweat still coated his bare arms and chest, and in his hand he carried a short sword with a serrated edge. 'Short' was a relative term, Vasado reflected – the weapon was easily the equivalent of a hand-and-a-half blade for normal human.

The first legionary inclined his head. 'Brother Kyda. Another win for you, I see. How many is that now?'

'Not enough,' said Kyda, glaring at the soldiers. 'Answer me.'

'Th-this is Amendera Kendel, of Malcador's Chosen…' Novice Soteria began, her voice quavering. 'She has come here to speak with you, lords.'

Kyda ignored the girl, turning his attention on Kendel. 'The Sigillite sends a lackey, after letting us rot here for years? I hope your words begin with an apology, else you may take them and tell the Regent to–'

'Decorum, brother,' insisted Gallor.

Kyda cursed in a tongue that Vasado didn't understand, but Qelvyn paled a little, making it clear that she did. 'It's Barbarusian,' she muttered. 'It implies the liquefaction of one's internal organs.'

'Charming.' Vasado made the mistake of catching Kyda's eye, and the legionary pointed his blade at him.

'Go away,' he hissed. 'Unless you want to join me in the practice pit for my next bout.'

'The Imperium needs your help,' said Kendel, cutting through the conversation.

She said it with enough firmness that everyone fell silent. ‘A threat has arisen close to the heart of the Imperium, and for my sins, I have been ordered to expunge it. The Warmaster’s insurrection grows more dangerous with each passing day, and the well of the Emperor’s resources is not infinite. Horus will invade, and so little in the way of men and materiel can be spared from the preparations.’ She opened her hands. ‘I have a ship. I have a small crew. But I need strength.’ Kendel nodded towards Kyda. ‘*Legion* strength.’

‘What kind of threat?’ asked Gallor.

‘Traitors,’ she replied. ‘Of that there is no doubt.’

Kyda’s sneer deepened. ‘Ask the Fists to do it. Or are they too busy standing on battlements and marking the time?’

‘Yes, they are,’ said Kendel. ‘The fact is, every loyal warrior of the Legiones Astartes across the segmentum has a place and a mission. None can be spared.’

Gallor frowned. ‘So you come to us.’ He paused, thinking it over. ‘And perhaps, you are here for another reason… To let us prove our loyalty again.’

Kyda gave a rough chuckle. ‘Ah, brother. Your lack of cynicism is always refreshing.’ He pointed at Kendel. ‘She wants us not because of the fidelity we have proven, but because of the very nature of our circumstance! We are troubling to the Council of Terra. They know not what to do with us. No one will trust us to fight, and no one dares to try and eradicate us. So we sit in this cave waiting for the choice to go one way or the other!’ He turned his head and spat. ‘You came here, Kendel, because we are *expendable.* Because we can perish on Malcador’s mission and no one will notice.’

‘Yes,’ she repeated. ‘All that is so. The discretionary powers granted me allow a wide degree of latitude in their execution. I am making the best use of available resources.’ Kendel’s voice rose again. ‘I seek assistance in this. Two souls. Who of the Death Guard Legion will accompany me against the enemies of the Emperor?’

None of the other legionaries appeared to hear her.

Kyda planted his sword in the dirt at his feet. ‘Do you really believe that any of us will take to your command?’

And then Kendel did something that Vasado wasn’t expecting. She smiled.

‘Your name is Bajun Kyda. They call you the Bull of the Seventh.’ She glanced at the other warrior. ‘And you are Helig Gallor, known to be grave but of strong character. Yes, lords, I know the names of all of the Seventy, alive and dead. And I understand what it is like to be cut away from something you have dedicated your life to, lost to it because of one person’s toxic choices.’ Kendel’s gaze

passed over the Novice-Sister, and her expression was softened by sadness. Then the moment was gone. ‘Tell me, Kyda. Is there a day that passes in which you do *not* thirst for the sting of battle? How much longer will you be willing to chafe under the mantle of inaction?’ She indicated the other legionary Kyda had bested in the pit. ‘How long do you think it will be before your temper snaps and you take it out on one of your brethren?’

The soldier saw the truth of all Kendel said unfolding on the legionary’s face. It was a gift, he thought. The woman had a way of getting under your skin, an insight that was almost uncanny.

‘And you, Brother Gallor.’ Kendel turned to the other warrior. ‘You have said little, but from the moment I arrived here, you have hoped that it would be with a way out of this hole in the ground.’

‘I thought you were a blank, not a mind-reader,’ said Gallor.

‘I am an exceptionally good judge of character,’ Kendel replied. ‘When you have hunted as many fugitives as I have, you learn to see past the surface to what people are really thinking. Even transhumans like you.’

Kyda made a rough, snarling noise, and for a second, Vasado thought the Death Guard was growling like an animal. But then he realised the warrior was *laughing*.

‘Mark me, the Sigillite is cunning to choose you as his agent,’ he said, giving a slow nod. ‘Very well. I’ll join you. Or I may well end up killing someone. Better it be a traitor.’

‘Good choice,’ said Kendel.

‘Do we get any of that new wargear, like Garro and the others?’

She shook her head. ‘Not for the moment, I’m afraid.’

Gallor shot a look across at the other legionaries, who had put distance between themselves and Kendel’s group. ‘You only need two of us,’ he said. ‘Someone will have to counterbalance my battle-brother’s quick temper.’

‘Is that a yes?’ said Vasado.

‘No one else will follow,’ said Gallor, by way of a reply.

In short order, the *Velox* left Luna and powered away from the plane of the ecliptic. Seeking a system Mandeville point, the vessel pierced the veil of the warp and screamed into the realm of non-space, hurtling across vast distances towards one of Sol’s closest stellar neighbours.

Kendel climbed the length of the corridor tube that followed the gun-cutter’s spine until she reached the cramped command deck. It reminded her of the

interior of an ornate clock, all complex mechanisms and devices ticking and spinning, the elements whirring as they worked.

Interstellar ships of this tonnage were a rare commodity in the Imperium. Typically, warp-capable craft were kilometres long, with engine cores alone that would have dwarfed the entire mass of the *Velox.* But the handful that did exist – many of them using ancient, irreplaceable archeotech from before Old Night – were largely in the hands of Malcador the Sigillite. The ship was the one vital resource that Kendel had been able to wrest from the Regent of Terra for this mission. The rest of her tools were those that she had been able to source through guile and ingenuity.

The thick windows at the front of the flight station were blind for now, closed off from the madness of warp space by black iron shutters that blotted out the sea of insanity. All but one of the *Velox'*s command stations were occupied by quiet automata or servitors; unlike a human crew, the machines and mind-wiped helots would never question – or even *remember* – their secretive missions, no matter where they took them.

The sole human on the command deck was a taciturn male of Nordafrik descent named Sorkad, who never left the compartment, even for sleep or refreshment. He peered owlishly over his shoulder at Kendel as she entered, a rig of multifaceted optic lenses over his face snapping back so he could look at her.

'Agentia,' he said, by way of greeting.

'Time to translation?' Kendel had quickly learned that Sorkad had no interest in conversation beyond the most basic interactions. She liked the simplicity and directness of that.

'Thirty-eight hours.' He turned back to his panel.

She looked away, finding the bulbous hemisphere set into the flight deck's ceiling. A heavy hatch covered with psychometric wards protruded from the curved surface. This was the lower part of a bell chamber where the *Velox'*s Navigator Mazone drifted in null-gravity and did his strange work guiding the gun-cutter through the immaterium. Kendel had not laid eyes on the Navigator since boarding the ship, and Mazone had made it clear that he did not want to be in the same room as the pariah – *or even aboard the same vessel,* she noted.

She didn't want to tarry. Even with walls of dense psi-dampeners between Mazone and Kendel's innate anti-psionic qualities, the former Oblivion Knight feared that she might cloud the Navigator's ability and cause the *Velox* to drift off-course.

She heard gentle footsteps behind her, and a sound that was half gasp, half

retch. Kendel turned to see the ship's other psyker, the blind astropath, retreating back into the corridor. The woman's olive skin paled and her long-fingered hand went to her mouth.

'Milady Pau Yei,' Kendel began, trying to soften the moment with the use of the honorific. 'Please, wait. I would speak with you.' She followed the astropath off the bridge, and the other woman kept backing away, almost stumbling. One hand rose in an unconscious gesture of warding, the other desperately feeling the way along the curved walls of the corridor.

'Stop. *Stop.*' Pau Yei shook her head. 'Don't come any closer. It is most distressing.' A sheen of fear-sweat made her dulled complexion shimmer. 'Oh.' She snatched at an atomiser on her belt and sprayed it in her face, inhaling a sweet calmative mist to steady her nerve. 'Forgive me. I do not wish to be rude, but…'

'I understand. But please appreciate that this mission requires all of us to make sacrifices. Your comfort, I am afraid, is one of them.'

'Indeed.'

'I was looking for you,' Kendel went on. 'Your insight is required.'

'For what?' Pau Yei appeared as if she wanted to be anywhere in the universe but here in this moment.

'The others need to be briefed before we translate back into normal space. Better we do it now, to give everyone time to prepare.'

The astropath gave a nod. 'Could I not speak to them over the vox from my–'

'Follow me, milady,' Kendel insisted.

They assembled in the *Velox'*s cargo bay. Wide enough to accommodate a pair of Land Speeders side by side, it was empty except for the portable arming racks the Death Guard had set up against the inner hull wall. Qelvyn was fascinated by the pair of them, watching discreetly as they prepared their power armour and their massive, oversized bolters for whatever threats might await the ship at the end of its journey.

Vasado nudged her. 'Take a pict, it will last longer.'

'Maybe I will,' she said. 'I've never seen anything like them.'

'That's the idea,' said the other soldier. 'They were made that way.' He grunted to himself. 'But believe me, you may think a Space Marine is impressive, but you haven't seen anything until you've laid eyes on a primarch.'

She shot him a look. 'You've never seen one of them.'

'Not *one,*' countered Vasado. 'A *few.* I was at the Triumph at Ullanor.'

‘Liar,’ she replied, without malice. ‘Every trooper and their dog says that! Let me guess, you were right at the front, too?’

‘There *were* eight million of us.’ Vasado looked affronted. ‘It’s the truth! And no, I was a few miles back. Still saw them, though.’ He paused, recalling the moment, losing himself in it. ‘The Emperor was there.’

‘Our gene-father too,’ rumbled the legionary called Gallor. He’d clearly heard every word they had uttered.

‘And Horus,’ added the other Death Guard, Kyda. He replaced his gun on the rack and tossed a cleaning cloth into a bucket. ‘I wonder if that’s where the rot began.’

Gallor glanced at the two soldiers. ‘Forgive my brother. We have had little to occupy us of late, and during inaction our thoughts dwell on bleak questions.’

Kyda advanced on Vasado, looking him up and down. ‘You were there. So were we.’ The Space Marine placed a giant hand on his shoulder. ‘There will be less marching this time.’ He turned away once more.

Qelvyn and Vasado shared a look. *What the hell does that mean?*

The hatch behind them clanked open and the astropath Pau Yei flitted into the compartment, moving as quickly as she was capable to the very farthest corner of the cargo bay, hand over hand along a guide rail. A second later, Kendel entered and gave them all a nod. She sat atop a storage crate and ran a hand through the short fuzz of her hair.

‘Well, now,’ she began. ‘Time for explanations. We’re under way, so the full scope of this mission can be detailed.’

‘You promised me traitors,’ said Kyda. ‘Do not renege.’

‘The enemy are waiting at our destination.’ Kendel fished in the pocket of the heavy, brocaded surcoat she wore. ‘We are on course for Proxima Centauri.’

‘That’s a loyalist system,’ said Kyda, with a sniff.

‘Is it?’ Gallor raised an eyebrow.

Vasado gave a start. ‘I… I was born on Proxima Secundus.’

‘Yes, it’s almost like Malcador had some sort of plan when he picked you,’ Kendel replied dryly. ‘Trooper Vasado’s local knowledge will be of use to us when we arrive at the capital world of Proxima Majoris.’

The soldier’s expression soured. ‘I’ll do what I can. But I never had much time for all the First Family nabobs and rich preeners on Majoris.’

‘Noted.’ Kendel went on, then began her briefing in earnest. ‘I’ve been granted clearance to tell you the following. Over the past few months, the astropathic choir in the City of Sight on Terra have been intercepting strange psionic

messages from beyond the solar system. At first, they thought these were ghost echoes or some other empyreal phenomena, but investigation has shown otherwise.'

'Who is sending the messages?' said Gallor.

'We don't know.'

The Death Guard frowned. 'Where are they going?'

'Out.' Kendel gestured at the air. 'Into the Ruinstorm.'

'To Horus, then?'

Kendel's lips thinned. 'That is the most likely explanation.' She turned to Pau Yei. 'Milady, if you would be so kind as to illuminate us further?'

'Of-of course.' The demure little astropath's head flicked up at the sound of her name. She gulped down water from a jewelled bottle chained to her belt and took a shuddering breath. 'You may have heard the rumours. Some time ago, a cadre of Word Bearers led by the dread centurion Sor Talgron committed grievous sabotage on Terra. One such action was an attempt to destroy the psionic levees in place around the City of Sight. It left us open to… a far greater intrusion.'

'Psionic what?' Qelvyn's eyes narrowed. All this witch-talk was beyond her.

'Telepathic barriers,' said Gallor. 'Go on, milady.'

Pau Yei nodded to herself, the empty sockets in her face looking at nothing. 'Perhaps the full details are not germane to this conversation. The important point is, during the reconstruction of those levees, we detected the echo-imprint of unauthorised psionic arias coming from Proxima Majoris. It was pure chance. Had the barriers been in full effect, we might never have known…' She halted again, reframing her thoughts. 'The prognostics have confirmed that someone on Proxima Majoris is secretly transmitting data to the enemy through the song of a suborned astropath.'

Kyda considered Pau Yei's words. 'A spy based on Proxima could monitor ship movements coming in from across the segmentum. They would be able to track the transfer of hardware and manpower to and from Terra, if correctly embedded. It's a sound deployment.'

'Malcador thinks so,' said Kendel. 'The Sigillite's orders are clear and unequivocal – we are to find and terminate the rogue astropath, along with whoever is controlling them. But it must be done carefully.'

Pau Yei gave a curt nod. 'Hence our enforced cooperation.' She gestured in Kendel's direction. 'We are, for the duration, the witch-seeker's retinue in this matter.'

‘We’ll try to make it less of a chore for you, milady,’ Qelvyn deadpanned.

‘I see why this mission was not granted to Lord Dorn’s warriors,’ added Gallor. ‘Kendel has her status as a null and her expertise in hunting psykers, aye, but more than that, the deployment of a visible legionary force would raise panic in the local populace.’

‘The Imperial Fists don’t know how to walk quietly,’ Kyda noted.

‘Exactly,’ said Kendel. ‘We don’t want the government of a system of Proxima’s tactical value to be divided by accusations of treachery.’

Kendel didn’t expand on that, but Qelvyn had heard talk of some Imperial colonies falling into anarchy and in-fighting when loyalties were directly challenged. The last thing the Imperium needed on the eve of invasion was witch-hunts and pogroms.

‘Vasado.’ Gallor turned to Qelvyn’s companion. ‘What is the character of this world, its people?’

The trooper frowned. ‘Stuffed shirts, the lot of them.’ The Death Guard’s quizzical look made it clear he didn’t understand the reference, and Vasado went on. ‘Majoris is run by a cabal of nobles descended from the first colonists to arrive in the system, and if you’ll pardon my bluntness, they think their sewage doesn’t stink. It’s a very regimented, narrow-minded society with a strong military component. Everyone on the planet claims to be related to some war hero or another. Proxima’s supplied men and women to the ranks of the Imperial Army since the First Expedition. Take it deadly serious, they do. We walk in there cracking off about a spy in their midst to all and sundry, and it won’t end well.’

‘It would be shameful to them,’ said Gallor, grasping the trooper’s meaning. ‘So any investigation – and accusation – will need to be discreet.’ He paused. ‘Not my usual sort of battlefield.’

Kyda made a spitting noise. ‘This sounds unpleasantly like a diplomatic mission.’

‘Oh, there’ll be blood to be shed,’ Vasado corrected. ‘Proximans don’t do anything by halves, and a traitor won’t go quiet, not on that planet.’

Kendel got to her feet. ‘I’ve had data-slates programmed with all the available intelligence we have on Proxima Majoris and the reports from the prognostics. I advise everyone to review them.’

‘Are we dismissed?’ Pau Yei said quickly, sensing the briefing’s conclusion.

‘Aye–’ Kendel had barely started speaking before the astropath bolted from the room as best she could and disappeared into the corridor.

‘Something we said?’ muttered Vasado.

Qelvyn caught his eye and shot a look towards the witch-seeker.

‘Oh. Right.’

The group broke up and Kendel decided to walk the length of the *Velox* once more, to gather her thoughts. But she had barely gone a few metres when she heard the heavy footfalls of one of the legionaries behind her.

She turned to find Gallor filling the corridor. ‘Agentia. I would speak with you.’ The Space Marine was hunched forwards so that his head would not touch what for him had to be an intolerably low ceiling. The gun-cutter was not built for those of legionary stature.

‘What is it, Brother Gallor?’

‘You do not recall me, then?’

Kendel paused. ‘I’m sorry… Have we met before?’

He nodded. ‘Aye. Years ago. I should not expect you to recollect, we were both clad in armour, masked at the time. But we passed within arm’s length of one another, in the rush of battle.’

A flash of memory came to her. ‘The castigation of the Jorgall at Iota Horologii? Of course. The Sisterhood fought alongside the Seventh Company of the Death Guard there.’

‘You were quite impressive, for a non-modified.’

‘That action did test the Sisters of Silence,’ she noted. Once upon a time, she might never have dared to admit such a thing, but it was true. The Jorgall – a species of telepathic cyborg xenos – had invaded Imperial space inside a vast bottle-world, and they were targeted for purging. The mission had succeeded, but in the combat, many of Kendel’s fellow Storm Daggers had been killed or maimed.

‘It seems so long ago,’ said Gallor. ‘I miss the purity of knowing who my enemy was. But this arena you are taking us into… There, our foe wears the same face as us.’

Momentarily, Kendel found herself lost for a reply. Gallor’s statement chimed with the same sense of melancholy that had taken hold of her the moment she set foot on Luna. ‘That is so,’ she told him, at length. ‘I think perhaps both of us have been forced to confront a hard reality in recent times.’

‘*Betrayal.*’ Gallor spoke the word with grim fortitude. ‘It is a powerful thing, to know that those who shared your oaths have chosen a path that makes them your foe.’

Emrilia Herkaaze's face rose and fell in Kendel's thoughts. 'True enough, legionary.'

'You do understand, then.' Gallor nodded to himself, and Kendel had the sense that she had passed some kind of test with the Death Guard, that now he considered her worthy of his loyalty and not just his duty. 'We have both become ghosts haunting our former lives. It would be well to feel… *useful* once again.'

The Velox's atmospheric shuttle was a stripped-down Eridani-pattern variant of the workhorse Arvus-class lighter. Little more than a cramped metal box with engines and winglets, it was still more aerodynamic than its mothership, and while Sorkad, Mazone and Pau Yei remained in orbit with the gun-cutter, Kendel flew the rest of her group down through the clouds towards Proxima Majoris' largest metropolis.

The Sigillite's authority granted them an expedited approach over the towers of the great city. In typically egotistical Proximan fashion, the capital was named Majesty, and it spread out across hundreds of tiny islets over a shallow sea. Each fragment of land was filled by tall castle-like constructs, and the myriad canals threading between them were busy with watercraft.

Two fighter flyers escorted them down to the courtyard of a massive ziggurat festooned with coloured pennants.

Vasado and Qelvyn disembarked first, and made a show of military precision in their stride and posture. On Vasado's suggestion, they had polished their boots and spit-shined their carapace armour to parade-ground perfection, and it seemed to have the right effect on the local officers, who looked on in admiration. Kendel herself walked out with the two Death Guard warriors flanking her, in a calculated moment of theatre.

There was bowing and nodding and a great amount of empty platitudes, and Kendel soon tired of it. She demanded to proceed to her meeting with the Exalted Governor of Majoris, the High Minister and Aristarch Bakaro Proge.

That earned her some sharp intakes of breath – *a break in protocol,* one of the Proximan officers called it – but Kendel wanted to keep them off-balance.

Leaving the troopers with the lighter, Kendel and the legionaries began a lengthy trek around the ziggurat castle and its corridors. Serviles and soldiers alike bowed or hastened away as her party passed. On many of their faces she saw the same kind of awe that most humans experienced on seeing a Space Marine. A special sort of *shock* at laying eyes on a being bred only for war, a scion of the Emperor himself.

But in each of them, Kendel searched for a glimmer of something else – a truer fear, of the variety that those who kept a secret would exhibit.

Somebody here, perhaps in this very building, knows why we have come.

At each turn, she saw more evidence of the militaristic culture that Vasado had spoken of. Not just the lionising monuments to soldiery and ancient battles, but an all-pervasive propaganda machine in action through visual feeds and vox-horns. As they marched along an open gallery that looked out over the walls and into the streets beyond, Kendel noted that even the cut of civilian fashion was styled along quasi-military lines.

A sharp sound reached her, and she paused. Kyda and Gallor heard it too, both their helms turning to look in the same direction. *The crack of an electro-whip.* The noise of the weapon's discharge was very distinctive; then it came again, this time followed by a woman's cry.

'There,' Kyda pointed.

Kendel looked and saw a man in a variant of an Imperial Army uniform, specifically that of a discipline master. Usually, the masters were deployed to maintain control of penal battalions – but here the man was whipping a civilian, shouting at her for some infraction that Kendel could not determine. Now that she looked carefully, Kendel saw that there were more similarly dressed figures on every street corner.

'What is going on?' she demanded.

The Proximan officer leading them raised an eyebrow, and it took him a moment to realise what she was asking. The discipline master's actions were clearly so commonplace that he barely registered it. 'Encouragement,' he said simply. 'It is important for those who have not served to know they are a burden.'

'He's punishing that woman because she is not in the military?'

The officer gave her an indulgent smirk. 'No, Agentia. He's *encouraging* her to be grateful to those who are.'

Aristarch Proge was exactly the man Gallor had expected him to be. Fighting lamely against obesity, he was squeezed into a heavy uniform dripping with medals and honorific icons. He wore a stiff ceremonial kepi atop thinning hair, and he moved everywhere in a purposeful, if affected, stride.

The Death Guard legionaries took up stances in the middle of the room and stood sentinel as Kendel greeted the Proximan ruler. Impassive in their wargear, to Proge and his aides they resembled statues made of ceramite.

Gallor's gaze fixed on one particular member of the Aristarch's staff, a hard-faced woman with a single long tail of crimson hair emerging from the right side of her otherwise shaven head. The woman – a marshal of some kind, judging by her rank tabs – was momentarily open-mouthed at the sight of the two legionaries. But Gallor got the sense that her reaction was not just because of what they were, but *who* they were. Her eyes kept straying to the skull sigil of the XIV Legion on their shoulders.

Proge's effusive greetings had come to an end, and the governor was giving orders to his people to bring refreshments. Unnoticed, the marshal took a wary step towards the Space Marines. 'You… were not expected,' she said, turning to address Kendel. She spoke quietly, so her words did not carry. 'Are they… I mean, has there been some problem?' The marshal was fumbling for the right words and failing to find them.

Kendel shook her head, giving a flat smile. 'Have no concern. Despite what stories you may have heard about the actions of Mortarion's sons, I vouch for *these* Death Guard. They are loyal to Terra and the Emperor.'

'Ah.' Colour drained from the marshal's face. 'Of course. *Of course.*' She bowed and made her excuses, slipping away as Proge returned with ornate cups of tisane.

'Agentia Kendel,' he began. His voice had a low, slightly nasal register. 'Please, join me in a drink and let us get down to cases. How may the people of Proxima serve the Imperium?'

Gallor noted that Kendel accepted the tisane but did not sip it. She settled into a chair as Proge sat across from her. His aides retreated to the corners of the room and stood stiffly at attention. 'I come with grave news,' Kendel replied. 'What I am about to say will upset you, sir. There is a dire threat on your world. A threat not only to Proxima Centauri's safety, but to that of the entire Imperium.'

Proge's permissive manner faltered at the grim tone of Kendel's words. 'That is no small claim.'

'Indeed.' Kendel fixed the Aristarch with a hard, unwavering gaze and unfolded the same narrative she had presented to Gallor and the others on board the *Velox.*

The Death Guard watched the progression of emotions that swarmed over Proge's florid face. At first shock, at the possibility that the Warmaster's agents were using a co-opted Imperial astropath for clandestine communications; but that swiftly reformed into slow-burning anger as Kendel made it clear that this misdeed was taking place on Proxima Majoris, right under the noses of Proge and his people. Some of his aides could not remain silent during the witch-

seeker's explanation, and Gallor noted which of them decried her most stridently, sifting their reactions for signs of artifice.

But Kendel did not allow herself to be put off, and she relentlessly followed the accusations to their end, shooting down every denial with cold facts, answering every question with clipped, direct replies. Gallor felt a growing admiration for the woman. She approached things in a manner very similar to Death Guard doctrine – methodical, unflinching, and forceful.

At last, Proge's manner fell towards dismay as he found there was no other path open to him but acceptance of the Agentia's revelations. The Aristarch sat back in his ornate chair and seemed to shrink beneath the weight of new truth. 'By the First, how could this happen?'

'The ways of the traitor are varied,' said Kendel, her smoky, rough tones hanging in the tense air. 'Rest assured that no stone will remain unturned in my investigation.'

'Of course!' barked Proge, and he summoned one of his people with a brisk wave. 'Habeth! You will give the Agentia everything she needs!'

'Your servant, Aristarch.' A man in a heavy brown coat with much bronze braiding stepped forwards and introduced himself to Kendel as Planetary Warden. A ranking law enforcement officer, Gallor guessed, but his first impression of Habeth was of someone too prim to dirty himself with the work of urban policing.

Kendel shot the Death Guard a brief look that communicated a similar disquiet. Later, both of them would recall how, in that moment, Agentia and legionary alike should have acted on their first instincts.

But by the time they understood that, too much blood had already been shed.

Four days later, Vasado was the first casualty of the investigation.

In scry-monitor footage from where the River of Exemplars met the Oval Palisade, Kendel watched him die in slow motion. The driver of a hover-lifter heading westwards suddenly appeared to lose control of his vehicle, and the fan-drive truck bounced off the churning waters of the canal in a howl of revving engines. In less than half a second, the hauler mounted the quay and bulled across the pavement, ploughing down three other civilians before flattening Vasado beneath its plenum skirt. Its path ended when it struck a wall and caught fire. By the time emergency responders arrived, the driver had burned to death. He made no attempt to exit the vehicle.

Dutifully, Warden Habeth poured a platoon of uniformed constables into the

area to investigate, but every one of his detectives returned a report of happenstance.

'A tragic accident,' Habeth had told her, from behind the desk in his air-conditioned office. 'Majesty has overpopulation issues, and these things happen more often than we would like.'

Any suggestion of conspiracy was met with polite denial. The reports pointed to the innocent civilians who had died in the incident; surely an assassin would not have struck against one of the Agentia's party in so blatant a way, with so much collateral damage? Habeth gently condescended that Kendel might be better to concentrate on the matter at hand rather than assume a connection where none existed.

Outwardly, she accepted his report with a rueful nod. Inwardly, she pushed Habeth up her list of suspects and ordered Qelvyn to begin surveillance on him.

Kendel ditched the official hydrofoil launch and pilot that the Aristarch had provided, and escaped into the backstreets of Majesty. Blending into the crowds, she reached the others over their encrypted vox-net and tersely gave new orders.

'*Habeth is lying, then,*' Kyda noted.

'Perhaps.' Kendel lost herself in the folds of her hood and hailed an automated water-taxi, scrambling inside. 'We'll need proof.'

Lady Pau Yei's words echoed down from orbit. '*Assuming Vasado was deliberately terminated, we must ask the question – why him?*'

'*Soft target,*' offered Gallor.

'*A warning?*' Qelvyn did a fine job keeping her emotions tamped down, Kendel noted. She had been friendly with the other trooper, and doubtless felt his death more keenly than anyone else.

The Agentia shook her head. 'I don't think so.' In her hands she cradled a compact personal auspex module that had been a favoured tool during her time hunting rogue psykers. She peered at its illuminated screen, studying an abstract map of Majesty. 'Vasado went into the city to follow a lead. I believe he found something, and was killed before he could communicate it to us.'

She heard the doubt in Kyda's voice. '*How will you be able to determine what he learned?*'

'I have an idea…' The water-taxi halted and Kendel jumped down from the passenger cabin. She was on the far side of the great waterway from where the 'accident' had taken place. Constables were still patrolling there, and nearby an imposing discipline master shouted at a gaggle of civilians for daring to loiter. 'I think I know what Vasado came here to observe.'

Kendel had studied the footage of the trooper's death dozens of times, and in each iteration she had become more certain that he was watching something. The scry-scan image did not show enough of the surroundings to make it clear what that was, but now she stood there, it was obvious.

It was a deliberately nondescript, heavily over-built pinnacle of thick stone. It had few windows, and those that were visible were opaque with stained glassaic. The exterior was covered with fine detail that at a distance looked like random patterns of aging; but close at hand, Kendel knew it would form into strings of symbols. She had seen the like upon the outer walls of the City of Sight and a hatch aboard the *Velox* – psychogrammetric wards to protect those within from the mental tumult of the world outside.

Like the City of Sight, this tower – the planet's principal astropathic spire, home to its psyker cadre – was off-limits to anyone like Kendel. To allow a pariah into its environs would cause those within to suffer greatly.

Kendel's hand slipped into her robes to rest upon the grip of a pistol, and she boldly marched across a connecting bridge, directly towards the spire's entrance.

By the time Gallor and Kyda arrived at the astropaths' citadel, the situation had deteriorated to the point that the Space Marines thought a weapon had been detonated in there.

After some consideration, Gallor realised that was not far off what *had* happened.

Amendera Kendel was as toxic to the astropaths in the spire as a choking gas would be to any ordinary human. As they crossed the building's tiled atrium, the legionaries saw dozens of the blind psykers buckled at the knees or huddled together in corners. Many of them lay moaning with the extrasensory agony that the null's presence inflicted, while their seer-automata stood patiently nearby, waiting to guide them away.

Ululating warning sirens were sounding, and shutters made of heavy psi-dampening materials had slammed down over entranceways leading deeper into the building. They found Kendel at the centre of the screaming and the panic, her weapon drawn. She was surrounded by a handful of the hardiest of the psykers, and demi-human security servitors armed with stubber weapons and restraint net casters.

One of the astropaths, an angular meister with a high hat and sallow complexion, shouted at Kendel. Gallor saw he was bleeding from his nostrils and his ears. 'Get out!' he screamed. 'You are burning us within, null! Leave now or

we will destroy you!'

'No,' Kendel spat back, daring them to approach. 'There is a rot at the heart of this place. You have a traitor here, and someone knows it. Reveal them to me!'

'Lies.' The astropath retorted. 'Lies, lies, *lies!*'

During the voyage to Proxima, it had been Kyda who suggested that the corrupted psionic might not, as Kendel had first considered, have been working in secrecy and isolation. She had been uncertain of the legionary's implication that their target would hide in plain sight, but with Vasado's death it seemed the former witch-seeker had seen the reason in Kyda's words after all.

'No psionic signals could depart this world without leaving some trace. If our target is not among you, then one of you is covering for them.' She glared at the psykers, menacing them with a step forwards. Kendel didn't need her gun to kindle their fear.

'Enough,' wailed the meister as he reeled away, spitting pink froth from his lips. He snarled a command at the servitors. 'Kill the woman!'

'I think not.' Gallor intervened, he and Kyda making their presence known with heavy footfalls and the slides on their bolters. The gun-drones, intelligent enough to gauge the level of threat posed by two of the Legiones Astartes, showed programmed restraint and held back.

Kendel addressed the meister. 'Listen to me. I will return to this place day after day, night after night, I will torment you without ever raising a finger…'

Several of the astropaths began to wail like bereft widows.

'I will do this,' she promised, raising her hand to present the Mark of the Sigillite branded on her palm to the sensor eyes of the servitors. They bowed automatically and she went on. 'Neither your guardians nor your Aristarch will be able to prevent it. Unless you tell me what I want to know!'

The meister gave a keening screech and collapsed. 'There is… *no*... traitor here!'

But the words had barely left him before the rattle of an explosion echoed through the walls from the spire's exterior, and Gallor heard the clattering of shattered glassaic.

'Krak charge,' hissed Kyda. 'On the southern face of the building.'

Kendel shoved the meister out of her way and nodded to Gallor. 'Go!'

He took the order and broke into a sprint, thundering back out into the daylight.

Kendel ran as fast as she could, but the Space Marines left her behind in the blink of an eye as they powered away from her around the side of the spire. By

the time she reached them, panting hard, her legs aching, a gun battle was already in progress.

Someone had blown a hole in the side of the building two storeys up, and cast down mono-cables from the ragged rent in the stone. The legionaries exchanged fire with men in worker's overalls and breather masks, armed with lascarbines. She saw a handful of them hustling another figure – this one in the robes of an astropath – along a jetty towards a torpedo-shaped jet-skiff lying in the swell of the canal.

Crimson threads of energy crackled through the air around her, and Kendel ducked behind a nearby sculpture. Gallor and Kyda didn't bother with cover; they weathered the beam hits with stoic calm, taking their time over each bolt they fired. Every shot was a kill – with the huge mass-reactive rounds, it could be nothing else. On the unarmoured forms of the masked men, a hit was enough to blast them into unrecognisable meat.

Kyda shifted aim towards the escaping party. 'I have their range.'

'No!' Kendel shouted over the sounds of gunfire. 'We need the psyker *alive!*'

'We can't reach them before they get to the boat,' he grated.

'We'll find another way,' said Gallor, before Kendel could respond. 'But it may earn us the ire of the Aristarch…' The Death Guard advanced, pulling something from a pack clipped to his waist. A grenade, as big a child's skull. He hurled it in a low arc, and the device landed with a thud in the middle of the jetty. The hail of lasers faltered as the masked men realised what was happening, but it was too late.

The grenade detonated with a deep roar of concussion and threw up a pillar of river water into the air. Suddenly the jetty was matchwood, and of the shooters there was no sign.

For a moment, Kendel feared that Gallor had disobeyed her and killed them all, but then she heard the shriek of an aqua-jet engine and saw the low skiff rocking in the wake of the blast. A bloody, screaming man slipped off the side of the vessel and under the water, as it vaulted away towards one of the larger waterways.

'With me!' Kendel cried, and she scrambled up over a rail, dropping to a quay that had been partly swamped in the explosion. Tethered to the dock was a pilot's hydrofoil, and she splashed across the waterlogged jetty and onto its weather deck.

Kendel thumbed the starter, and the foil reacted.

She was aware of someone behind her calling out angrily, but then the vessel

rocked hard as Kyda and Gallor leapt aboard. She heard Kyda say something indistinct, followed by a heavy splash. Her mind wasn't on that, her focus now solely on the jet-skiff. Under her hands, the controls bit into the river and the foil powered away. Gallor's combat blade flashed as he severed the stern line, and Kendel pushed the throttle bar as far as it would go.

Brackish spray came over the bow before the vessel found its pace, soaking her coat, but she ignored it. Kendel aimed the hydrofoil into the wake of the fleeing jet-skiff and leaned forwards, as if the motion would grant them more velocity.

Red streaks whistled past, wide shots fired more to discourage pursuit than to damage them. Kyda fell to a knee and aimed down the iron sights of his bolter, but did not fire. The constant rising and falling of the skiff and the vibrations of the deck would make any shot a challenging one, even for a legionary.

'We'll catch them,' said Gallor. 'This vessel's engine is more potent, if slower off the mark.'

'As long as we don't run out of room first,' Kyda replied, nodding ahead. 'Look there, brother.'

The canal leading from the astropathic spire opened out into a river, but this waterway was dense with massive cargo ships moving up and down it in long lines, each one like a skyscraper on its side. The jet-skiff snaked back and forth, and Kendel thought she saw panic in the way the helmsman was acting. Too slow to commit to a course that would take it through the wake of the nearest cargo vessel, the fleeing boat was racing straight towards the side of a slow-moving hulk, a wall of red-painted steel rising up to block its path.

'Fools,' Kyda offered. 'They have nowhere to go.'

And for a moment, Kendel would have agreed with the legionary's assessment. She glimpsed a flash of sunlight off curved plastic as the jet-skiff's canopy slid shut, sealing the craft's interior. Then, like a breaching cetacean, it leapt out of the waves and fell, nose down. The craft vanished under the surface and was gone.

'Throne and blood!' Kendel spat the curse and wrenched the hydrofoil's steering yoke hard to port, before their vessel could be pulled into the turbulence left behind. It was a clever ploy – draw them close so that they might get sucked into the side-wake of the big cargo craft.

The hydrofoil lurched in a yawing turn that briefly put the deck at a steep angle, and had the legionaries not been braced, both would have gone overboard. Kendel gunned the engine and swore again as they raced along the side of the ship, losing precious seconds in their chase. The jet-skiff wasn't a dedicated

submersible, that was certain – but in taking a shallow dive beneath the keel of the cargo hauler, it had put them far behind.

She smelt smoke as they bounced over the wake and around the sluggish obstacle before them. Orange warning lights blinked on the display before her, warning of an engine overheat in progress. 'Find them!' she barked.

'*Calm yourself, Agentia.*' Sorkad's dour voice crackled in her ear. '*I can assist.*'

'Where are you, pilot?' said Gallor, casting a look up into the pale blue sky.

'*Where I have been all along, in the cradle of space. But the* Velox*'s orbit is directly over Majesty. And this ship's optics are very, very precise.*'

'You see the speeder?' A wolfish grin threatened to break out on Kendel's face. It was still new to her, this idea of having… What had Pau Yei called it, *a retinue?* It did not come naturally to the former witch-seeker to rely on the skills of others.

'*I do,*' Sorkad replied. '*Feeding you the positional data now.*'

Gallor placed a hand to his helmet as the information was relayed to his visor display. 'That way.' He pointed to an industrial zone on the far side of the wide river. 'They won't escape.'

The guards left on the dock by the disused refinery fell to pinpoint shots from Legion bolters, and in moments Gallor was striding down a set of iron stairs into a flooded, echoing under-space. Kyda was at his side, and the two of them moved at a deliberately slowed pace in order to let Kendel keep close. Kyda's body language expressed fully how little he enjoyed that, but they had both agreed to this mission and to the ex-Sister's authority. They waded forwards ankle-deep in the oily, cold waters.

'Thermal traces,' Gallor announced, spying blotches of colour through the imagers in his helmet. 'Fading with the chill. We're close.'

'When we find them… Only the astropath is to live, yes?' Kyda asked Kendel, a note of annoyance in his words.

'More than one prisoner would be useful,' she retorted. 'You may feel free to wound with abandon.'

Kyda made a dismissive noise as they reached a sealed hatchway, and with one swift motion, he planted his armoured boot in the door with enough force to knock it off its hinges. Gallor's battle-brother shouldered through, and he was a step behind him.

The chamber beyond might once have been a store-room, but now it was a bolt-hole, with suspended platforms above the flood-waters and makeshift dormitory

spaces. Gallor took this in within an instant, as men with guns opened fire on the warriors of the Death Guard.

'For his glory!' screamed one of the shooters, and Gallor knew from the Eye of Horus daubed on one wall who *he* might be. Small calibre bullets rang harmlessly off the legionary's sealed armour, some of the ricochets spinning back to strike down those who had fired them.

Kyda had already terminated five people in the time it took Gallor to draw a breath, and the other Death Guard stormed across the room to make a close-in kill with a heavyset man who died fumbling with a cut-down lascannon. Gallor advanced, moving and firing, aware of Kendel behind him and her desire for a prisoner or two.

But it seemed these traitors were unwilling to facilitate that end.

Through the melee, he caught sight of the robed astropath making a break for another exit across the compartment, and he shouted to the witch-seeker. The psyker stumbled under a roller-gate, which he slammed down into the shallow water as he passed, in the apparent hope of cutting off any pursuit. Gallor sneered at such foolishness.

Breaking another attacker with a back-hand blow from his gauntlet, Gallor went to the gate and wrenched it open again, enough for Kendel to pass through. She hesitated, jabbing a finger past his helm, her eyes widening. 'Behind you!'

He spun to face another of the assailants, this one dragging round a rotary autocannon to aim in his direction. He faced it, shielding Kendel as she moved.

The gun screamed, filling the chamber with cordite stink, and a torrent of armour-piercing rounds ate into Gallor's breastplate. Chips of ghost-white ceramite sheath were blasted away in seconds, exposing sections of metal beneath, but Gallor still ran *into* the stream of fire, one arm raised to protect the lenses of his helmet.

He destroyed the autocannon by stopping the spinning barrels dead with his armoured gauntlet, and then, without pause, the Death Guard rammed the sizzling weapon back into his attacker, caving in his chest with the force of the impact.

Silence fell.

Kendel sprinted up a ramp and emerged blinking into the sunshine, finding herself on a steel platform that led down to another jetty. The astropath was at the edge, shivering and clutching at the air, dithering over which direction to flee in. He sensed her approach and rounded on her. The man's face was heavy with

age, nerves in his jaw trembling with panic. He took a step in her direction, raising his hands in talons.

'You won't take me to the Black Ships!' he screamed. 'I will tear out your throat before I let you!'

Kendel was aware of her laspistol's weight in her hand and she let it drop to the deck. 'I'm not here for you. I want to know who sent the messages.'

'Liar!' He spat the word at her, and Kendel remembered the same insult from the lips of his comrades in the spire. 'I had no choice in that, but they'll never believe me!' The psyker wanted to attack her, she could see it clearly, but the mental repulsion between them was too much for him to overcome. He coughed up bile. 'Curse you!' He reached out, as if he could somehow strangle her from a distance.

Then his lungs exploded out of his chest in a spurt of aerosolised crimson. The astropath staggered, pawing sightlessly at the open maw of parted ribs running from his sternum to his belly, before he came crashing down.

Sunlight flashed off the canopies of a dozen hovercraft out on the water, each flying the pennant of the City Wardens as they floated in to surround the platform. Kendel saw the sharpshooter who had killed the astropath rack the slide of a long-las and eject a spent powercell. Brown-jacketed wardens swarmed off the craft and flowed around Kendel as she stooped angrily to recover her gun.

When she looked up, there was Habeth, standing over the astropath's corpse with a virtuous cast to his face. As if he had slain some kind of monster.

He met her gaze and gave a theatrically overwrought bow. 'Death to all traitors,' he intoned.

The Aristarch's proclamation echoed from the speaker on the wall. On Kendel's orders, Sorkad piped the vox transmission to her cabin on the *Velox,* and she listened with growing dismay. Her eyes fixed on the planet below through a viewport in the hull, Kendel found the dark smudge where the city of Majesty was located on the surface, and glared at it.

Proge's speech was as florid as he was. On and on it went, circling around the subject and wandering off on tangents; but somewhere among all the words, he was declaring a victory. The Aristarch told his people of a terrible conspiracy that he had smashed with the help of Warden Habeth, promising them a planetwide day of celebration.

Before she had departed the city, Proge had declared effusive thanks to Kendel,

and as she had found with the matter of Vasado's death, there was little opportunity to entertain the thought that Habeth might *not* be the hero of the day. There were many promises made, assurances about a purge of Proge's government to come, to root out any lingering taint across the planet – but it all seemed too engineered, too well rehearsed to the former hunter.

The *Velox* had been granted priority to depart, but Kendel bid Sorkad to hold the ship where it was, encouraging him to fabricate a minor lie about repairs in progress.

Too easy, she told herself. *As if everything has been a kind of shadow play, conjured to guide us down a single path.* Habeth was hiding something, Kendel had no doubt of it, but would her gut feeling be enough to act upon? The Sigillite's authority allowed her a long enough leash to do so… But it would also prove more than enough to hang her with should she be mistaken.

She missed the precision of her witch-seeker days. Back in the Sisterhood, things had been clear-cut.

There was a hesitant knock at her hatch, and Kendel heard a faint choking sound. 'Enter.'

The hatch slid open and Pau Yei was outside, sweating and sickly from her proximity. 'I will remain here, if it pleases you.' She gripped a rail on the curved wall as if she were afraid some terrible gravity would drag her into the witch-seeker's cabin.

Kendel's eyebrow rose. For the astropath to seek her out, matters had to be dire. 'What is it, milady?'

'I have read the Warden's reports on what happened at the refinery.' Pau Yei spilled her words out in a rush, eager to say her piece as fast as she could. 'The astropath who was shot by the sniper. His name was Yaang. I knew him, Agentia. When I was an apprentice seer and he an instructor. But well enough, I declare, to know that he would *never* betray the Emperor. His service was his life.'

'How long ago?' asked Kendel.

'Seventeen years.'

'Long enough for a man to change his mind. How long did it take Horus to suborn his brother primarchs? And Yaang was only a man.'

Pau Yei didn't answer the question, her dead eye sockets turning towards Kendel instead. 'You have your doubts too. I know it.'

Kendel frowned. 'Go on.'

'Yaang was a highly trained and subtle psyker. And most importantly, too

accomplished and fastidious in his ways to allow something so base as ghost echoes of his psionic signals to seep out. There is more to this matter,' she insisted. 'This is not the resolution.'

A sudden thought crystallised in Kendel's mind. 'Is it possible that Yaang's "echoes"… the signals detected by the prognostics… may have been a *deliberate* attempt by him to cry for help?'

'A warning?' said another voice. Pau Yei retreated as Gallor's bulk filled the corridor. 'Forgive me. I have been walking the ship to settle my thoughts, and I overheard your conversation.'

'I'll warrant the Death Guard doubts the veracity of these events just as we do,' said the astropath.

'This is so.' Kendel saw Gallor's great head nod. 'I am reminded of my own commander's mission to carry word of perfidy back to the Emperor. What if Yaang was attempting to do the same?'

I had no choice. *They'll never believe me.* Kendel picked over Yaang's last words, wondering if she had unwittingly been part of the narrative at work on Proxima Majoris.

All psykers had a pathological fear of pariahs like her. Had she been manoeuvred into confronting him?

She rose to her feet and reached for her lasgun. 'Gallor. You and Kyda are to rearm and make ready for immediate deployment.'

'As you wish,' said the legionary. 'To what end?'

She didn't answer him straight away, turning instead to Pau Yei. 'Milady, will you summon Qelvyn to the airlock and join us there? I have need of you and what must be done cannot happen if you remain on the ship.'

The astropath paled, but forced a nod. 'I know what is required of me. I'll do it.'

Kendel shot Gallor a look. 'This mission isn't over.'

The first team was Gallor's to command, much to Kyda's irritation.

But then the other legionary had never been best suited to leading, and the task Kendel gave Gallor was one that required the ability to think with more than just a boltgun. The Arvus lighter dropped him off in the industrial district with the soldier Qelvyn and the astropath, before speeding away towards the precincts of the highborn.

Here it was dark and gloomy, an endless boulevard of pipes and towering fabricant works set well away from the pretty streets of Majesty. Workers toiled

endlessly, none daring to look up as the unusual trio moved past them.

'The discipline masters have done their work well,' Gallor reflected. 'These plebeians focus on their labour to the detriment of all else.'

'Aye,' noted Qelvyn. 'Whipped dogs is what they are.'

'If they raise no alarm, then that is in our favour,' said Pau Yei, stepping awkwardly over the irregular ground beneath their feet, charting a path with the left-right-left motion of a sonic cane. She came to a sudden halt and pointed with one long finger. 'There is death there. I sense the echo of it.'

The astropath indicated a narrow tower that at first glance Gallor had taken to be a colossal chimney. Grey smoke billowed from the top, and he saw what looked like dirty snow gathered at its base. 'Ash-fall,' he noted. 'What are they burning in there?'

'Corpses,' said Qelvyn. 'Vasado told me the Proximans cremate everyone. They call this place the Terminae, but it's really nothing more than a giant furnace. If this man Yaang's body is anywhere, it'll be in there.'

Pau Yei gave a wooden nod. 'We must move swiftly. His remains must be intact if I am to be sure.'

Gallor nodded, clamping his gun to the mag-plate on his back. 'Fall in behind me and stay in the shadows.' He set off again, avoiding the gaze of the pict-feed lenses.

Kendel landed the lighter in the gardens of the Aristarch's mansion among flyers from all across the city, and with Kyda looming at her side, she marched through the throng gathered for the celebrations. They parted before her, whispering and giggling like amused children. None of the Wardens patrolling the area, nor Proge's personal guards, dared even to consider waylaying them.

She climbed the stairs to the Planetary Governor's reception chamber as they had days before, past myriad scented candles and festive banners, to the solid oaken doors that barred the way.

'Aren't you going to knock?' muttered Kyda. It seemed the kills he had taken in the refinery had done nothing to lessen the constant simmering of his ire.

'Do it for me,' Kendel ordered, and that brought a brief, wolfish grin to the legionary's face.

Kyda slammed open the doors and strode into the chamber, advancing on the nobles inside like the executioner he was. The Death Guard's shocking entrance had the desired effect, and as Kendel stepped around him, she saw a sea of frightened faces before her.

Her gaze was immediately drawn to Proge, who sat bolt upright, frozen in mid-conversation with the marshal she recalled from their first day on the planet.

'Agentia Kendel?' Proge rose slowly to his feet, faltering. 'What is the meaning of this?'

The marshal forced a false smile. 'With respect, this is a gathering for Proximans, not off-worlders. Had you wished to attend–'

'We're not here for your little party,' Kendel snapped. 'I grew weary of the obstructions placed before my retinue. I am taking a more proactive approach.'

'Your tone is disrespectful!' retorted the woman, blinking furiously. 'You have blundered around our city, witch-hunter, and for what? We were willing to turn a blind eye to the disorder you brought to Majesty if only to see your task here swiftly completed, but now you overstep your bounds!'

'You think so?' Kendel showed her the brand on her palm. '*My bounds,* as you call them, are where *I* decide them to be.'

'Be calm,' ordered Proge. 'We are civilised. We will act like it.' He gave Kendel a firm look. 'Are you *quite sure* you have made the right decision here, Agentia?'

Something in his tone cut right into Kendel, and for a moment she felt like she were a Novice-Sister again, hauled up before her superiors to be chastised for some trivial infraction.

Then she crushed that emotion and looked Proge in the eye. This was a man used to being obeyed, and like these other nobles, used to being the unquestioned master of all he surveyed. Suddenly all she saw was arrogance, entitlement, condescension, and she wanted very badly to knock that out of him. A smile grew on her lips. 'Quite sure, Aristarch,' she echoed.

'You have what you came here for,' insisted the marshal, her eyes flicking to Kyda's impassive bulk and then back again. 'What more do you want of us?'

Proge's expression softened and he tried a different tack. 'Agentia Kendel. Do not judge us too harshly. I will admit to you that all Proxima was shamed by what you uncovered in the spire, but I believe it better to celebrate the success than to dwell on the errors of a few wayward renegades.'

'Wayward?' Kyda growled the word, silencing the room. 'That is how you define a traitor on this planet? As if they have simply made a childish mistake in showing fealty to Horus?'

'The Warmaster has…' began the marshal, before she paused to reframe her words. 'You must accept that no one on Proxima Majoris has seen the dark things we have been asked to believe about Horus Lupercal. He is remembered

well by many. It is natural that some might still have a measure of devotion to him. That does not make them evil.'

'No,' agreed Kendel. 'It makes them *fools.*' She took a step towards the other woman. 'Parochial, arrogant fools. And traitors still.'

Qelvyn grimaced at the scene that awaited them within the Terminae. This was no place for respecting the dead. It was an industrial facility for disposing of waste.

A vast conveyor belt studded with anchor spikes rolled endlessly towards the rumbling maw of an incinerator, carrying discarded human bodies into the fires. She averted her gaze, looking up, and found more to horrify her. Above, complex mechanisms of cables and racks were in constant motion. They ferried new bodies down to the belt, and along the way robotic claws plucked clothes, funeral goods and anything else of value from the corpses.

Pau Yei gave a cry of anguish and without waiting for the rest of them, scrambled wildly up a ramp to the sorting platform, her cane clattering and humming as she went. Gallor shot Qelvyn a look as they gave chase but he said nothing, his broad face unreadable.

The astropath tried to remove a cloth-wrapped body from a moving rack, cutting her hands in the process. Qelvyn saw a face frozen in death peering out of the shroud, an older male with the same style of ornamental electoos on his cheeks that Pau Yei sported on her face.

Gallor dragged the dead man to the floor and laid him down as gently as he could. Frowning, the legionary opened the cloth wrapping further, revealing the ugly remains of a lasgun wound. Qelvyn watched Pau Yei swallow her grief and push the Space Marine's hands away. Gallor let her, taking a step back and guiding her down with his hand. 'You are sure it is Yaang?'

'Aye.' Pau Yei's long, delicate fingers peeled back the shroud and ran over the dead man's flesh, the ruined sockets, the taut skin across his face. A gasp escaped her.

Qelvyn saw something – a glitter of metal embedded in the corpse's neck. 'What is that?'

'Mechanicum implant,' answered Gallor. 'An agoniser. I've seen them before, but rarely on a human.'

The soldier scowled. Such devices were made for domesticating animals, bionic modules half-buried in flesh. Operated by remote control, an overseer could use one to send a governing pulse to the nerve clusters of a wild beast, cracking it

like a whip. But they had other uses; it wasn't unknown for them to be implanted in dangerous prisoners.

'Someone was tormenting Yaang,' Pau Yei insisted. 'Hurting him to ensure his compliance. Now they want his body destroyed so that this evidence is lost forever!' She leaned closer and clasped the dead man's skull in her hands, and Qelvyn sensed a peculiar metallic tang in the air as the astropath's head tilted back, her mouth falling open.

'What is she doing?'

'Reading him,' said the Death Guard. 'It is said that the mind-speakers can read the psyches of their brethren as well as you or I would page through a…' The warrior fell silent as something clanked off a nearby platform. He reached for his boltgun.

Qelvyn's laspistol was already in her hand, and she thumbed off the safety, her attention flicking between Pau Yei and her surroundings. 'What is it?'

'Company is coming,' said Gallor, in a low voice.

Before he could elaborate, Pau Yei released a strangled sound deep in her throat, and let go of Yaang's head as if it had scalded her. Her face was pink and filmed with sweat.

'What did you… see?'

'Only pain and anguish,' said the astropath, barely holding in a sob. 'At the end… He was so lost and afraid. How *dare* they do that to him!'

More noise reached Qelvyn's ears and her head snapped around to look in the direction of the sound. Shadows were moving towards them.

The legionary reached for a manual tab on the neck ring of his armour and spoke into a vox-bead there. 'Kendel, this is Gallor. Do you hear me?' Static hissed back at him, and Qelvyn knew the sound of a jammer when she heard it. 'Kyda? *Velox?* Anyone who reads this transmission, respond.'

'They won't let us reveal what we have found,' Pau Yei said darkly.

A flood of brilliant light washed over them from above and the approaching figures were made clear. Warden Habeth and a large force of his men moved in to surround them.

The Proximan noble aimed a richly decorated sword-gun at the trio. 'I knew it from the start,' he hissed. 'Disloyalty in each and every one of you. And now you steal into our city like criminals, violating the dead!'

'*No!*' cried Pau Yei, staring blindly into the dazzling illumination. 'This matter is not ended – there is untruth at work! Yaang was forced to do what he did, don't you understand? This is proof!'

‘This is *treachery!*’ he shot back.

Qelvyn saw a cold choice being made behind the Warden’s gaze, and she knew that Kendel’s instincts about Habeth had been right from the start. ‘He understands well enough,’ she told the astropath. ‘Better than anyone.’

A heartbeat later, Gallor opened fire.

Kendel waited for the explosion of fury and self-important bluster that she had come to expect from the Proximan highborn, but instead Proge showed her an oily smile. He glanced at the marshal and the other nobles in the room, and the witch-seeker felt a moment of doubt. Had she misjudged them?

As a former Silent Sister, she was an expert in understanding communications that were unspoken, and now she saw exactly that passing between the Proximans. Kendel suspected that Proge was holding something back, and chalked it up to his priggish nature, to his dislike at being forced to acknowledge her authority.

But it was more than that.

‘This conspiracy of lies, the astropath Yaang and the suborned signals…’ She eyed the Aristarch. ‘With a culture as byzantine as yours, it is credible that you were unaware of it occurring within the ranks of your underlings.’

‘Yes?’ he offered, willingly giving her an opening.

‘But that’s only one more lie atop the others, isn’t it? You were never ignorant of this sedition.’ At her side, Kyda raised his bolter. ‘I suspect you may be the author of it.’

The carefully pitched mask of pomposity and self-importance slipped as the smile from Proge’s thin lips widened. ‘I have never been party to treason,’ he replied. ‘My loyalty has been firm and unswerving from the very start.’ The Aristarch aimed a finger at Kyda. ‘Unlike *you,* legionary. You betrayed your father! You betrayed Lord Mortarion and the Warmaster!’

The marshal’s face twisted in a snarl. ‘Sickening. To see a warrior of such potency rotting and weak inside.’

Kyda growled, but Kendel held up a hand to halt him from any immediate act of violence – although she suspected the pause would not last long. ‘That explains what happened when we first arrived…’ She met the marshal’s gaze. ‘You thought that Gallor and Kyda were here on Horus’ orders, because they are Death Guard…’

‘She almost tipped our hand.’ Proge chuckled to himself, amused by the thought. ‘Yes. We await Lord Horus, for it is he we have sworn to, not an

Emperor who ignores His closest neighbours, who plunders our world for its sons and daughters to be so much cannon fodder!'

'What did he promise you?' said Kyda.

Proge opened his hands. 'Not power or riches. We have little need of those.' He shook his head. 'No, Death Guard, you do not see. The Warmaster is truly honourable. He is not consumed by dreams of empire like his father! He offered us only *what we are due.*'

'How many years has Proxima served the needs of the Imperial war machine?' demanded the marshal, her eyes flaring. 'And what have we been given in return?'

'Never enough,' muttered Proge, and the others in room echoed his words. 'Never enough.'

'The Warmaster's triumph will be *our* triumph,' said the other woman. 'He values loyalty.'

Kendel slowly shook her head. 'You're wrong. Horus values victory… and any tool that will bring it to him.'

Something in the witch-seeker's tone made the marshal flinch, and the woman tore her ceremonial pistol from its holster, spinning it up to put a shot into Kendel's chest.

The weapon's muzzle never cleared the tooled leather. Kyda blew her apart with a single pull of his trigger, blood and jewels and splintered wood crashing across the room as the mass-reactive round tore through unprotected flesh and the ornate furniture beyond it. Outside in the courtyard, where the crowds were gathered, Kendel heard cries of alarm.

She drew her own weapon and aimed it at the Aristarch. 'Bakaro Proge,' she began, 'I name you traitor. The sentence is death.'

He continued to smile at her, ignoring the smoking ruin that had been his co-conspirator. 'You'll kill an unarmed man? Is that the Sigillite's idea of justice?'

'No,' she admitted. 'But this is.' Kendel turned to Kyda, keeping her gun on the others. 'Take him outside.'

Habeth was dead, lost on the Terminae's conveyor along with many more nameless corpses, cut down by Qelvyn's laspistol. His wardens did not perish so easily, however, and it tested Gallor to keep the soldier and the astropath alive while he returned fire. He wasn't used to playing the part of protector. It wasn't a role that the Death Guard had ever excelled at.

Gallor kept his kills metered and steady, moving and firing, firing and moving,

until finally they broke out of the tower through a service duct and went across the rooftops of the nearby rendering works. He found himself constantly halting to allow the humans to catch up with him. The soldier did her best, but she was panting with effort and fear.

Finally she shouted at him. ‘Make up your mind! Fight with us or abandon us! But just bloody well pick one!’

‘I…’ A reply began to form in his thoughts, but it was cut short as his genhanced senses picked up the scent of rich, arterial blood. ‘Who is wounded?’

Qelvyn’s face twisted in confusion; then in the next moment she was grabbing the astropath, pulling Pau Yei towards her. The other woman’s hand came away from her side and it was red and wet.

‘A glancing shot struck me as we fled,’ she gasped. ‘I can walk.’

‘*Now* you’re coming over all brave?’ Qelvyn grimaced. ‘Idiot. You’ll bleed white if we don’t stop that.’ The soldier set Pau Yei down in the lee of an air duct and set to work on dressing the wound.

Gallor shifted, trying to look in every direction at once. His keen hearing picked out the whine of hovercraft engines and the distant slap of approaching rotors. If they could not get off the roof, they would be killed up here.

Qelvyn shot him a questioning look. ‘Any change with the vox?’

He shook his head. ‘We are silenced. There is no way to communicate with Kendel or the ship.’

Pau Yei coughed and gave a mewling cry at the jolt of pain that came with it. ‘No…’ She managed. ‘That is not entirely accurate.’

The Death Guard saw movement at the far end of the roof and fired towards it, earning another kill as a warden was blown back. ‘Explain, quickly,’ he demanded. ‘The traitors are at our heels.’

‘I can reach Mazone. But it will cost me.’

‘The Navigator?’ Qelvyn blinked and tapped her temple. ‘You can… speak to him?’

‘I can try.’

‘You will,’ Gallor told her. ‘Or else we will perish here.’

No one dared to stand in Kyda’s way as he dragged Proge down the stairs and out onto the manicured lawns surrounding the building. A terrible, heavy silence fell, and the legionary scanned the faces of the crowd. Thousands of civilians, all genders and races and ages, but all robbed of their voices by the sight before them.

Good, he told himself. *Let them see this and understand.*

Kyda threw the Aristarch down and watched as he struggled back up to his knees. 'The gun or the knife?' asked Proge.

In reply, Kyda clamped his bolter to his hip and unsheathed his combat blade. 'Bare your throat. If you refuse, it won't be quick.'

'You think this means you win?' Proge looked at Kyda, then to Kendel. 'I am not the only one.'

'Your supporters will be expunged,' Kendel told him.

The Aristarch burst out laughing and he found Kyda's gaze again. A warning rang in the legionary's thoughts, like the sense of an unseen enemy at his back, a threat he couldn't parse.

'Everything we did was to make you go away,' said Proge, taking a breath. 'The hidden faction in the refinery, the incident at the spire, the execution of Yaang. All of it was to create the narrative that Malcador expected to find here. All so we could begin our efforts anew once your investigation was complete and you departed. But you just wouldn't *leave.*'

'What efforts?' demanded Kendel. 'Confess!'

Proge ignored her, concentrating on Kyda, as if he were trying to reach for some common kinship between them. 'It is not only *I* who has given my loyalty to Horus, Death Guard – we *all* have.' He opened his arms wide to take in his cohorts and his soldiers, and every single one of the Proximan civilians surrounding them. 'Proxima Majoris *itself* has sworn an oath to the Warmaster.'

Kyda looked out at the crowd. In each face he saw the same thing: determination, zeal, *belief.* The same thing, he realised, that he had once seen in himself, a lifetime ago on Barbarus.

The scope of the Proximan betrayal washed over him, snapping into perfect, damning focus. This star system was an ideal place from which to stage an attack on Terra. How deep could it go? How many forces were already here? The Aristarch could have been gathering forces loyal to the Warmaster from all across the segmentum for months. For *years.*

With a population sworn to Horus' banner, it could be done and never known by anyone across the light-years towards Terra.

'You can execute me,' Proge smiled, 'but do you have enough blades and bolt shells to execute an entire city?' He rose slowly to his feet. 'A whole planet?'

'We'll see,' said Kyda, and cut the Aristarch's throat.

Then, like the breaking of an ocean wave, the civilians in the crowd came screaming towards him. Before Proge's body hit the ground, Kyda was mobbed.

He reacted without thought, cutting and stabbing with his blade, his other hand drawing his bolter. A tide of furious faces rose up as the Proximans heedlessly threw themselves upon him, battering their fists against his armour, taking up anything that could be turned into a weapon.

He killed dozens in seconds, their blood sluicing across his wargear, but they kept on coming, ten more for every one he ended, and by sheer weight of numbers they kept him pinned.

His bolter ran dry and still they came. Kyda caught a glimpse of Kendel vanishing behind a wall of screaming faces, the pariah pushed back towards the doors of the Aristarch's mansion, before a howling youth clambered over his back and beat at his head with a heavy stone. He broke the young man's neck throwing him off his shoulders, but lost his gun in the action. There were too many of them to fight, more and more piling atop one another with each passing moment.

It was said that one Space Marine was the equal of a hundred common men. Now a revelation, a question, came to him as the huge, riotous mob dragged him down.

How many more will it take to kill me?

The mansion was the only place that she could go.

Kendel fired as she ran, but the shots did little to stop the horde from pouring over the Death Guard, and as she shouldered the doors shut behind her, the final glimpse she had of the legionary was of his bloodied face disappearing beneath an overwhelming throng of men, women and children. As she sprinted up the ornamental stairs, she heard the sounds of tearing metal and ripping flesh.

What kind of zealotry would be enough to make a mortal throw themselves at a Space Marine? Was this the power of the Warmaster? It staggered Kendel to believe that such an impossible compulsion could exist.

The question beat at her as she fought her way past guards through chamber after chamber. Her laspistol grew hot in her hand as it raced towards a critical overheat, searing her skin until at last she had to discard it. The gun fell to the floor, sizzling where it lay, and Kendel kicked open another door to reveal an ascending spiral staircase.

She followed it to the top of a narrow watchtower that grew out of the mansion's higher floors, halting at the saw-tooth battlements that ringed it. Far below she could see the crowd gathered around a ruined man-shape of meat and ceramite. What was left of Bajun Kyda lay atop a hill of human carrion, a

grotesque monument amidst all the delicate finery of the gardens and a poor death, even for one of such uneven temper. She saw the Arvus lighter nearby, already set alight and bleeding plumes of dark smoke.

The rising echo of voices reached her. Proge's guardsmen were searching the building, and they would not rest until she was dead. Did they already have a scheme, a set of lies engineered to cover up her death?

How would they explain it away, she wondered? Kendel imagined an account that painted her as a failure, one convincing enough to divert Malcador's attention away from the true treachery at Proxima.

And there was worse that could happen. Kendel had heard the rumours of the dark acts committed by Horus's cohorts, of unspeakable things that could warp the minds of the just and good.

Had that happened here? Could it happen to her?

She placed a hand on the stone battlement and considered throwing herself over it. Would it be a better death to die by her own hand, or was her end to suffer the same ignominious fate as Kyda? And what of Gallor and the others? The dead air from her vox-bead spoke ill.

A rare and unwelcome emotion came to her. *Doubt.*

Kendel could not stop herself from wondering if her kind of spirit – a secular, personal belief in one's self and a greater good – would *ever* be enough to fight back against the unquenchable zealotry of 'true believers' like the citizens of Majesty.

She imagined the face of Bakaro Proge, with his smiles and certainty; Emrilia Herkaaze, her hard eyes and unflinching conviction; and Horus Lupercal himself, that rising demigod whose rebellion had made him an unstoppable juggernaut.

Everything that Amendera Kendel drew strength from seemed very far away. She put one foot up on the battlements, then another, the breeze whipping at her cloak and caressing her cheeks.

She closed her eyes – and heard the heavy scream of thrusters.

The acrid stench of promethium fumes choked her and Kendel peered up, shielding her face with the blade of her hand. An ugly ingot of black shadow blotted out the Proximan sun as it dropped through the clouds, suspended on jets of white fire.

The *Velox* turned in place as figures on the ground opened up on it with small arms. Cannon cupolas on the ventral hull rotated with machine precision and strafed the crowd with las-bolts, ending all defiance.

A square of light appeared in the hull as a hatch opened, and Kendel saw a hulking figure appear. The ship drifted over to the watchtower and Gallor's armour caught the fire-glow from below. He beckoned her as a rescue tether played out.

Kendel grasped the cable as it swung low, and she left her doubts behind as it pulled her up and away.

Sorkad threaded them through a gauntlet of fire from the planet's automated gun-satellites, and the *Velox* took several hits along the way – but none were enough to wound the ship fatally, and it limped out to a holding orbit beyond the reach of the cannons.

Gallor took the news of his battle-brother Kyda's end with stoic calm, as if he had already known it to be so. In turn, he reported on Pau Yei's condition. The astropath was unconscious, clinging to life after being severely wounded and then exhausting herself with a psychic cry for help.

The Death Guard spoke of the slight little witch-kin with new-found respect. It was undeniable that Pau Yei had saved them all.

They entered the bridge to find Sorkad and Qelvyn waiting. 'We can make the Mandeville point and reach the warp,' said the pilot. 'If you wish it.'

'We have to warn Terra,' added the soldier. 'The Proximans will already be calling in ships to chase us down. We can't stay here.'

'Orders?' said Sorkad.

Kendel went to the canopy and peered out at the planet. 'An entire population turned to the Warmaster's banner,' she said aloud. 'So close to the Throneworld. And yet if we race home with word of this incident, we give them precious time to reinforce, to prepare a response.'

'Malcador will–'

She silenced Gallor with a look before he could finish the sentence. 'In this moment, in this place, I am the Sigillite. His authority is mine.'

Kendel recalled her old friend Emrilia's anger when they met on Luna: *If it were my choice, I would have you executed for your temerity.*

And with that, she realised she had only one more card to play.

'Agentia, what are your orders?' repeated Sorkad.

She glanced at the pilot, then to Gallor and Qelvyn. 'Where is the nearest Imperial warship of battle-barge tonnage?'

'An orbit distant,' said Sorkad. 'The vessels *Unfettered* and *Allegiant* are taking on supplies over Proxima Secundus.'

She held up her hand to show the brand on her palm. 'Bring them here, at best

speed. Brook no disagreement, accept no refusal. You will invoke Lord Malcador's word and override all other orders they may have.'

'To what end?' said Gallor. 'The *Unfettered* and *Allegiant* are world-killers. They are not equipped for an invasion or a measured counter-strike.'

Kendel nodded and licked her lips, a single word pushing at her to be spoken aloud. Her heart was beating hard in her chest.

'I have been granted the ultimate authority and I know now that it must be exercised. How can we defeat the zealous and the faithful? Not through words or hopes. Only by fire and death.'

She met the Death Guard's gaze and saw a flicker of surprise there. He understood what she was about to say, and it horrified him as much as it did her. What she intended to do was beyond the remit of any ordinary soul.

'No…' he began. 'It is unspeakable. You do not have the right. No human has ever…' Gallor hesitated. 'Not even a grand admiral. None less than a primarch, or the Emperor himself…'

But still he fell silent, finally accepting that there was no other choice to be made. There was a cost to taking the Warmaster's side, and it was going to be paid. An example had to be made. An execution was required.

'Bring them here,' Kendel repeated, 'and in Malcador's name, give their captains this command.'

The witch-seeker raised her hand and pointed at Proxima Majoris.

'*Exterminatus*.'

TEMPLAR

John French

‘The value of a warrior can be seen in their deeds, and in their deeds alone.’

– Khârn the Bloody

Sutaris
990.M30

The water danced on the curved blade. Sigismund watched it run from the perfectly still edge. Above him, the iron clouds rolled wet curtains of rain across the broken landscape. Fires still burned close by, clinging to wrecks and rubble, fighting the downpour. Ten thousand warriors stood on the slopes of the macro-crater, blood and battle marking their armour. All were looking down at him, their faces a wet blur on the edge of sight.

He was barely aware of the silent throng. The legionary opposite him was the only thing that was real now. Every twitch of the White Scar's pale armour, every breath between his sharpened teeth, every raindrop upon the silver smile of the guan dao *blade – Sigismund saw and felt them all.*

He began to wrap a chain around his wrist. The White Scar tossed his head, and pointed the tip of the guan dao at the iron links.

'Why do you do that?'

Sigismund held his gaze steady on the curved blade and kept winding the chain tighter. Tighter.

The other legionary smiled, eyes dancing in a hawk-proud face. He spun the glaive, armoured hands blurring around the weapon's haft, droplets scattering as it sliced the rain.

'Are you afraid of losing your sword?' the White Scar asked, laughter dancing in the words. 'A blade is freedom, son of Dorn. It is the wind and storm flash. Chain it, and you chain yourself.'

Sigismund was not listening. The world was closing in around him, narrowing to a point that held only the flicker of the blade, and the instant after it. This was

his realm, as much a part of his life as the air that filled his lungs, and the iron in his blood.

The chains rattled as he wrapped another loop around his wrist. His pulse slowed with the coiled links. The flow of time became heavy, like oil spreading over ice.

He had not wanted to do this, but the White Scar had insisted. It was not enough that two Legions had bled and died together fighting the same enemy upon the same battlefield. The White Scars had not expected the Imperial Fists to be there. They had not expected to share the victory, and that left something unresolved.

A champion had emerged from their lines and thrust his blade into the ground at Sigismund's feet. He had looked from the blade to the warrior's smile, and known that there was no choice.

There was never a choice.

Sigismund fastened the chain to his vambrace. He flexed one hand upon the hilt of his sword, feeling its weight shift in his grip. In the decade he had carried it to war, it had never failed him. He raised it above his head. He felt the muscles in his shoulders settle, listened to the slow rise and fall of blood in his veins.

The White Scar spun his weapon, then snapped it to stillness. Dirty rivulets of water streamed down the creases of his face. 'Do you not want to know my name?'

Sigismund looked up into the grey of his opponent's eyes. Jubal Khan – Lord of Summer Lightning, and the Death that Comes with Laughter – was still smiling at him.

'I know your name,' he replied.

'Good.'

Jubal looked into Sigismund's eyes and nodded. The White Scar held his glaive low at his side, the edge facing back. Sigismund watched him, weighing the rhythm of his stillness, listening to the instant stretch out.

A single droplet of water formed on the blade's point.

His pulse was still in his chest. His hearts paused between beats.

The drop of water fell.

Jubal whirled forwards. Sigismund cut down, and his opponent spun back, his blade a blur around his body. Sigismund swung again and again, his sword like a smear of steel and scattered rain. He was scything low and high, blade whistling, and the White Scar laughed as he ducked a cut and leapt into the air. The guan dao's edge winked as it arced down.

Sigismund froze. Jubal's eyes were wide above bared teeth as his blow fell.

Sigismund jerked aside, the curved razor-edge sighing as it passed his head. His sword flashed out. Jubal pulled back, snake-fast, his glaive rising, and for the first time the two blades clashed with a ring of steel.

Sigismund came forwards, hammering blows down one after another, feeling the sword shuddering in his grasp as the rain streamed past his eyes.

The White Scar's face was locked into a snarling mask, his smile gone. Soaking hair whipped above wide eyes as he ducked and spun aside. The guan dao was a razor blur, the play of weapons a spiral of slices and parries.

'You are everything they say you are…' Jubal called out. Sigismund saw the slight twitch at the corner of his eye, and slid past a sudden thrust. '…and you are more.'

The words washed over Sigismund. In his mind there was only the feel of his own sword, only the play of cuts and angles and balance that flowed through him like blood and breath.

Like life.

Jubal leapt again, twisting like a bladed hurricane. He was fast, so very fast. 'But you are missing something, for all your skill!'

He flicked his blade out and cut down, and Sigismund raised his sword to turn the glaive. He felt a blow ring against his forearm, and then Jubal was stepping back, sodden, topknot flicking to the side. Sigismund glanced down at his arm. The links of the chain binding the sword to his wrist had been severed.

Sigismund lunged. Jubal swayed like a tree in the wind, and the sword sliced through empty air. An armoured heel flashed out and snapped Sigismund's head back with a crack of bone and a spray of blood. Rainbow explosions detonated in his vision.

The cries of the watching White Scars roared into the deluge.

Sigismund reeled, his own blood blinding him, thoughts raging inside his skull: anger, and pain, and doubt, and…

Everything was still.

He let the drumbeat of his hearts roll through him. His world was the moment, his existence was the sword in his hand. There was nothing else. There needed to be nothing else.

Jubal's next move was already unfolding. Sigismund could not see it, he could not see anything, but he could feel it, like the silence before thunder.

His sword met the blow.

The force of the impact shook his teeth in his skull. He felt his sword move, felt

it ring as it deflected strike after strike. He was going backwards, his vision a clotting blur, his feet skidding in the mud.

Jubal was a scything spiral, delivering blow after blow. He was fast, faster than the wind, faster than the blink of distant lightning. But there, suddenly – like a flicker of sunshine through storm clouds – was an opening.

Sigismund shifted and cut downwards. He felt the impact, and struck twice more before the clang of the first strike had faded. Then Jubal was gone, spinning back out of reach.

Sigismund paused, checking his instinct to follow the White Scar. The sound of rain pattering on ceramite filled the waiting quiet.

Jubal stood once again at the edge of the circle. Blood marked his armour, diluting in the rain as it ran over the ivory-white plates. The guan dao was steady in his grip, but his left arm was twisted, the elbow joint leaking red. His gorget was crumpled, and cracks spidered his right thigh plate. The dancing glimmer had gone from his eyes – his gaze was suddenly older, patient, knowing.

'I will not beat you,' said Jubal, and there was weariness in his words. 'I know this. You know it too.' His lips cracked wide to show sharp, white teeth. 'But the song was worth the singing.'

Sigismund opened his mouth, forming words with a jaw that felt broken. 'You were beaten because you lack focus.'

'And you lack joy.'

'We exist to serve.'

'And there is nothing more?'

Sigismund shook his head. 'Nothing more.'

Jubal looked around, blinking, as though seeing the watching ranks of legionaries for the first time. Then he turned back to Sigismund, and spun his weapon with his good arm.

'Come, let us finish this,' he said.

'Have you killed a Space Marine before?'

The crone's voice pulls him from the memory. He opens his eyes slowly; the hold of the gunship is a shadow-filled cave. Amber light sheens the armour of the warriors seated beside and opposite him. There are twenty. Half are the chosen of his Templars, their white surcoats reduced to folds of grey in the gloom. The other half are Seneschal Rann's men, their battered armour and shields marked by the twin axes of the line-breakers.

Around them, the frame of the gunship rattles and sings as it plunges through

the void, and the distance to the comet shrinks with each passing minute.

News had come from Isstvan of the death of a primarch and the treachery of four more Legions. Within the Solar System, remnants of those new betrayers linger still – perhaps forgotten, perhaps ready to strike. They must be hunted down and destroyed. Rogal Dorn has tasked Sigismund with that duty, and he would see it done by his own hand.

His eyes move to the emissary. She sits between the armour-bloated forms of her gene-bonded bodyguards. Her exoskeleton gleams with chrome and polished carbon. Beneath the crystal of her visor, her face is a landscape of wrinkles, and hard bones under pale skin, but her eyes sparkle darkly as she stares back at him.

Her name is Harpocratia Morn, and Sigismund would not have chosen to have her here. That decision, like many others in recent times, is simply one that he has to accept.

She smiles at him, lips twitching as though amused by a joke only she has heard.

'So,' she asks again, 'have you?'

'Be silent, crone,' growls a harsh voice. It is Rann, of course. The captain of the assault cadre is not wearing a helm yet, and his black hair stirs from his sharp face as he leans towards Morn. 'Your words itch like flies. Keep them to yourself.'

His fingers are tapping on the hafts of twin axes locked to the back of his shield. Morn looks at him as though she has only just noticed that he is there. He meets the emissary's gaze, and bares his teeth. Morn raises an eyebrow and looks back to Sigismund.

'So what is the answer, First Captain?'

'Be–' begins Rann.

'Be what? The representative of the Emperor and his Regent? The emissary of the Council of Terra? Or merely a general who has stood on fields of blood and victory since before this Imperium was won?' Morn's face no longer looks decrepit. It looks hard and cold, like a notched sword that still has a killing edge. She holds Rann's gaze for a long moment. 'Which of these things would you have me be, Faffnir Rann?'

Rann says nothing. He is utterly still, fingers frozen where they rest upon the haft of one axe. Then his lips twitch around, and the snarl becomes a grin. He leans back, still grinning, but says nothing.

'I see why you like silence,' says Morn, her eyes still on Rann. 'It suits you.'

The gunship pilot's voice filters through the hold. '*One hundred kilometres to*

target. Ready condition crimson.'

Red lights blink. As one, the warriors grip their weapons. Sigismund glances down to his own sword – the blade is a reflected sliver of polished night held across his knees. A snaking iron chain binds it to his wrist.

He remembers Jubal's crooked smile, and the rain dancing upon his blade's edge.

The moment is coming. This is the threshold of the future that the treachery of Horus has made for them. He wants to embrace it, but wonders if that will change anything. He wishes that Morn had not asked her question.

Rann pulls on his plough-fronted helm. Morn arms a pair of chromed serpenta pistols, and he turns to her. 'Why ask if he has killed our kind?'

'Because we are about to go into battle against them,' Morn replies. 'Because in spite of the ideals of Unity, Space Marines have died upon the blades of their own kind before. Because the answer might mean that he bears a weakness that he does not yet see.'

'Is that why you are here?'

'I am here because the Sigillite wishes it.'

'He will not hesitate,' Rann mutters, and Sigismund imagines that he feels the warrior's eyes flick to him.

'You are sure?' asks Morn.

'Have a care.' Now there is no humour in Rann's words, only a sharpness like an axe's edge.

The noise of the engines rises in pitch. An alert begins to chime inside Sigismund's helmet.

'*Forty kilometres to target*,' comes the pilot's voice again. '*Breaching missiles loose*.'

Sigismund closes his eyes. In the corner of his visor display, the rune to release his mag-harness glows red. He takes a slow breath, feels calm spreading through thought and muscle. He remembers all the faces of enemies and friends reaching back into the darkness.

And through it all, he wonders if he will meet them again before the end.

'They say that he always kills with one cut,' says Morn.

'Only when he isn't swinging his sword like a farmer swatting flies,' Rann chuckles, though the words drain to cold sincerity. 'He has looked defeat in the eye, and smelled its breath too, but no one mentions that.'

'But you do?'

'I can say what I like of him. I have bled for the right. And – no matter how

good he is – he would take more than a scar if he decided to take offence. You do not have that right, no matter who you are.'

'But is it true that he has *never* been defeated, never lost a duel, never failed?'

'Never,' says Rann with a shake of his head. 'It's one of the things that make him so difficult to like.'

'Let us hope that he will not break the habit.'

Alert sirens sound. '*Breach impact countdown commencing*.'

'No,' says Sigismund, and opens his eyes. The mag-harness holds him firmly, but he looks down at Morn's dark eyes and sunken face. 'The answer is no.'

He returns his gaze to the assault ramp. Rann braces himself.

The engine noise is a rising thrum through armour and muscle alike. Sigismund tenses, ready for battle. His sword is a dead weight in his grip.

'*Five...*' The pilot's voice is a vox-filtered shout over the scream of the fuselage and the blare of sirens.

'The answer to what?' calls Morn.

'*Four…*'

What is about to happen will change everything. He is about to step through a doorway into a new age, a new meaning of what it means to be a warrior of the Imperium.

'*Three…*'

And beyond that, another future waits for him.

'*Two…*'

'I have never killed my own kind,' he admits.

'*One…*'

The Temple of Oaths, **Phalanx**
977.M30

Sigismund did not move when he heard the footsteps approaching. It had been twenty hours since he had set himself before the temple doorway, and it would be four more before he moved. His armour had gone into a low power cycle, runes winking in slow amber at the edge of his visor. His hands remained still upon the hilt of the sword, which rested point-down between his feet.

Overhead, the domed vault of the temple hung above the candle-diluted gloom. Great pillars soared, shadows snagging on the names cut into the black granite. Banners hung beneath the vault, their designs ragged and stained by the blood and fire of a hundred battles.

Silence always filled the great space, unbroken by the sounds of the star fort beyond its walls. Even in times of battle, the Temple of Oaths was a void of calm amidst the clamour. It had been designed that way, a reminder from Rogal Dorn that what this chamber represented stood untouched by all else.

Here, carved into every surface, were the names and oath words of every Imperial Fist who served or had served the Imperium. On this floor, all – from highest praetor to lowest legionary – had knelt and pledged loyalty. No door sealed the arch of its only entrance, but no one entered it unbidden.

To be a Templar was to be a guardian of that tradition, and with it the oaths of all Imperial Fists.

A lone figure walked out of the darkness beyond. The candlelight caught the gloss of black lacquered armour, and folded across a long robe of pale fabric. A hood cowled the warrior's features, but Sigismund did not need to see the face to know the man.

The figure stopped five paces from the doorway. Sigismund did not move.

Slowly, the figure reached up and slid the hood from his head. Dark hair framed a face set with green eyes. His name was Alajos, Captain of the Ninth Order of the Dark Angels, and one of the finest warriors ever to raise a blade in battle.

'You may not enter here, kinsman,' said Sigismund.

'I have no wish to,' Alajos replied.

'Then why have you come?'

'I have come to talk to you.'

Sigismund shook his head once, but did not move from beneath the arch. There was no point in talking, not now, not while the brooding anger of Dorn and the Lion filled the Phalanx *like a growing thundercloud. A dispute between these two paragons of war and nobility should not have been possible, but that had not stopped it from happening.*

It was not a matter of pride, or of insult. It was simply a matter of two beings – both so vast in power, so alike, and yet so different – clashing together like land and sea.

There had been other incidents in the past, other moments when the ideals of the Great Crusade seemed to do little but fuel discord. Curze, Ferrus Manus, Perturabo. The anger of all had risen against Dorn, at one time or another. Sigismund hoped that this new divide with the Lion would pass as quickly as it had formed. It was wasteful, a crack in what should be the perfect blade of the Legiones Astartes.

'There is nothing to say, Alajos. My lord has spoken.'

‘Yes, and my father also has spoken,’ the Dark Angel replied.

‘This… dispute will pass.’

‘And if not? How will it be resolved then?’

‘Not by blood.’

‘No?’

‘No. We are warriors of the Imperium, we were made to fight its enemies, not one another. Break that brotherhood and we are nothing.’

Alajos smiled. ‘Tell that to the World Eaters. Tell it to the Wolves.’

‘Such bloodshed serves nothing. It will not happen, not between our Legions. Not now. Not ever.’

Sigismund remained unmoving. After a moment Alajos nodded at the vaulted space behind him. ‘This is the Temple of Oaths, is it not?’ he asked, stepping forwards as he spoke.

Suddenly, Sigismund’s blade was barring Alajos’ path.

The Dark Angel raised an open hand. ‘Peace, brother. I will not cross the threshold. No Imperial Fist may do so, save to make or renew an oath, and none who are not of the Seventh Legion may enter and live. That is right, isn’t it?’

‘The primarch has permitted three of his brothers to enter, over the years.’

‘And if I took one more step…’

‘Then you would never take another,’ Sigismund replied curtly.

‘What would my blood shed upon this floor serve?’

‘Duty.’

The Dark Angel smiled, though the warmth did not reach his eyes. ‘What are we? Us two, what are we?’

‘We are warriors.’

‘But here and now we are more than that. We are champions. If blood is needed to satisfy honour, then it will not be our brothers’ or our fathers’. It will be ours. We are our Legions, and we are our oaths. We draw our swords, but they do not belong to us. The hand that cuts, and the eye that guides the cut are not the same.’ Alajos gestured to Sigismund’s drawn blade. ‘Duty. It binds us, it keeps us, it guides us. It is–’

‘Everything.’

‘Aye. No matter where it leads us, or to what end.’ He smiled again, and Sigismund recognised the emotion in the Dark Angel’s eyes. It was sorrow. ‘The storm may pass, but if it does not, then I wanted to be certain that we… understood *one another.’*

Sigismund explodes from the assault ramp, into the clamour of battle. The outer chamber of the shrine extends before his eyes. He has never set foot upon the comet before, but he has heard his father speak of it many times.

Walls of stacked skulls and polished bone arch above him. Words cover their faces, words that tell of who they were in life, and the deeds that brought them here in death. Each bone and skull belonged to a hero of the long Terran wars for Unity, sent here to orbit in the light of Sol as a memorial to the price paid for humanity's dream, for all time.

The XVII Legion had been the appointed keepers of the comet shrine since its creation. A hundred warriors of the Word Bearers stood guard within its halls, ever watchful, ever dutiful.

But now that duty had become treachery.

Left here by their brothers, they would die beneath the empty eyes of dead heroes.

Boltgun fire greets him as he charges. Shrapnel rings from his armour, but he does not falter. He is a blur, a flash of hard edges and blade's sharpness. The first Word Bearer is in front of him, bolter rising, his desecrated crimson armour glistening with reflected gunfire. Sigismund sees unspeakable glyphs etched through the glossy red and into the grey ceramite beneath.

There are more Word Bearers close behind the first, ten at least. The barrel of the boltgun is a wide eye staring back into his own. The steady drumroll of his twin heartbeat rises as the last stride of his charge falls.

The Word Bearer's finger grips the trigger.

Sigismund cuts.

Blood, wet-black in the flicker of bolt detonations, slashes outwards. The dead Word Bearer's grip tightens and a spit of flame roars. Sigismund feels the fiery breath of the boltgun rattle his helm.

He is already moving before the corpse even begins to fall.

He cuts again and again, each step a fresh kill. He is moving forwards, and his world is a rising beat of fragmented sensations. A torso cleaved from clavicle to groin. A hand reaching for a blade. The roar and surge of bolt-fire.

He hears and feels it all, but he is not a part of it. He is a single line of focus, slicing forwards, flowing from blow to blow like a river.

He is aware of his brothers following behind him, forming a wedge with him at its tip. They are driving forwards, firing at sentry turrets, hacking at red-armoured figures. Voices flicker across the vox as the rest of the force strikes directly into the shrine itself.

The resistance they have encountered so far is weak – the enemy numbers few, their tactics poor. Sigismund knows all this without thinking, without pausing from the scything rhythm of his sword.

A Word Bearer comes at him, faster than the rest, his head bare and skin webbed with inked sigils. Sigismund sees a blade whipping towards his neck, broad and jagged-edged. The blow is powerful, the product of training and experience. It is intended as a kill stroke, and a clean one at that.

Sigismund's murderous rhythm does not even falter. He slips the blow, turns and brings his own sword down.

Only then does he see the dagger. It is small, a spike of rough obsidian bound to a bone handle, and seems to shimmer in and out of sight as though dissolving in a heat haze. The Word Bearer thrusts the blade up – his eyes are wide in his tattooed face, his teeth bared in a snarl of triumph.

Sigismund twists aside, yanking his sword down to try and block the thrust. The black knife gouges across his plastron plate. Pain whips through him as his flesh burns against the armour. His sword strikes the Word Bearer's left arm, but the blow lacks power. The Word Bearer stumbles, recovers and thrusts again.

An axe head mashes into the Word Bearer's skull. Lightning explodes from the impact in a thunderclap of pulped meat and shattered armour. Rann shoves the corpse out of his way.

'You deserved to die to that, First Captain. You are getting sloppy.'

His armour and the face of his shield are a mass of metal scars and blood splatter. He does not look around as Sigismund closes with him. They stand shoulder to shoulder, the scarred butcher and the knight. More Imperial Fists lock into line beside them, shields and swords ready, firing as they reform.

A spiked mace crashes into Rann's shield and he rocks back under the force of the blow. Another Word Bearer stands before them, his armour bloody, his feet planted on the bodies of the dead. Sigismund waits for a fraction of a heartbeat, waits until he can feel the Word Bearer begin to pull the mace back.

'Now!' shouts Sigismund.

Rann slams his shield forwards. The Word Bearer staggers for an instant, recovers and swings down. Sigismund's sword takes him in the gut. He feels the blade shiver as it punches through armour, flesh and bone. Rann's axe takes the Word Bearer's head in a single blow.

'You still know nothing about war, brother,' Rann calls, and Sigismund can hear the grin in his words. 'But you are learning.'

Sigismund feels the flat of the seneschal's axe-head clash against his shoulder.

They drive forwards over the heaped corpses. Ahead of them Word Bearers are pulling back, firing as they move. Behind them high doors of brass and bone are closing over the mouth of a wide passage.

'Secure the doors,' Sigismund barks.

His brothers are moving to answer the order as soon as it leaves his lips. Five warriors, their shields held in a tight wall, sprint forwards. Bolt-rounds smack against them, spinning two back off their feet, but the remainder do not falter. They fire when the doors are almost closed, when the Word Bearers beyond can only be seen by their glowing eyes and muzzle flashes.

The meltaguns scream lines of thin, burning atmosphere at the closing doors. Plasteel and brass ripple like fat under flame. The graviton gun fires a second later, and the doors cascade from their frames in a ragged spill of white-hot metal. Sigismund is running again, Rann at his side, heat warnings chiming as glowing sparks splash around them.

And then they are through, into the passage beyond, molten slag scattering in their wake.

The killing rhythm flows through Sigismund. It feels different, detached, like a tableau moving before him, painted in blurred speed and the spray of blood.

He stops.

The passage is a wide darkness before him, now silent and empty. A false wind is gusting around him, as air sucks out through the breach in the outer chamber wall. Rann breaks away, pressing forwards, his shield bearers bracketing him in a tight wall.

For a second in the silence, Sigismund thinks he catches a distant voice that is just below hearing. He looks down at his sword. Blood has clotted in the links of the chain binding it to his wrist.

'This is only the beginning,' says Morn from the passage mouth. He looks up. She walks towards him, the pistols in her hands trailing heat haze and vapour from their barrels. Her two bodyguards walk a pace behind her, their rotor cannons cycling down. 'You are wondering why, after all your anger at the betrayers, this now feels like nothing.'

Sigismund looks back through the doors. Blood-shrouded shapes cover the floor. There are bodies armoured in yellow amongst the crimson gloss. His eyes focus on a severed arm, still clutching a gladius in its gauntleted fingers.

'You are thinking that you are a blood-killer now,' she continues, 'a slayer of your gene-kin.'

He looks up at her. There is no longer any laughter in her eyes.

She nods once. ‘You are, First Captain. That is exactly what you are.’

He turns without replying and moves to follow Rann. His sword feels heavy in his hand, and the chain binding it clinks against his wrist.

It has been less than two minutes since he killed the first Word Bearer.

The duelling cages aboard the **Conqueror**
995.M30

Khârn grinned as the sword sliced towards his ribs. He was still grinning as he lashed the falax blade towards Sigismund’s throat. The blow was fast, fast enough that a human would barely have seen it, but Sigismund was already stepping back and slicing downwards.

The World Eater caught the descending strike between his paired blades, scissoring past the sword, and slashed out again. Sigismund met the cut with the flat of his sword, point down, guard high. Khârn’s blade slid past. Sigismund flicked his sword over and cut back.

Khârn froze. Sigismund watched the vein in the side of the World Eater’s neck beat once against the sword edge. A thick worm of blood crawled across the polished plasteel, clotting even as it ran down his bared chest.

Khârn snarled. The muscles of his neck bunched against the sword. The flesh around his eyes was twitching, and he was breathing hard, though not from fatigue.

Sigismund raised an eyebrow. Khârn spat, reversed his grip on his twin blades, and turned away. Beneath the waist, he wore simple black trews tied with a length of rope.

Sigismund whipped the sword blade through the air, blood drops shaking from it to scatter on the sand-covered floor. In contrast, he wore a simple robe of white crossed with black, cut so that the flesh of his arms was bare to the dull light.

Armour was customary for the fighting pits of the World Eaters, but not in this case. Not between these two.

The curved walls of the pit were raw iron, marked by gouges from weapons, and dappled with dried blood. Sigismund sniffed as he lifted his gaze to the ranked tiers above the lip of the pit. Silence and emptiness stared back at him. He looked to where Khârn hung his paired blades from a weapon rack. The World Eater’s breath was still ragged, his scalp still twitching around the metal of his aggression implants – his Butcher’s Nails.

‘Again?’ asked Sigismund.

Khârn’s hands moved over the weapons on the rack, touching the haft of a long chainaxe, lingering on the coils of a meteor hammer. But he picked out a sword, the blade as wide as his arm. Golden wings spread above the quillons to form a cross-guard, and a single ruby blood drop looked out from between their pinions. Khârn tossed it from hand to hand as a human might with a knife, weighing it, judging it. ‘I am always surprised that you like it here,’ he murmured.

‘I don’t.’

‘Yet, here we are again.’

Khârn let the weapon rest in his grip. He frowned down at the long blade, and shook his head. Then he turned to the rack, and slotted the sword back into place.

Sigismund watched the World Eater pick up each weapon in turn. He waited. He knew why Khârn did this, and he knew that it was nothing to do with which weapon the World Eater eventually chose. He appreciated the reason, even though the two of them had never spoken of it.

At last Khârn gripped the handle of an axe that was more cleaver than war weapon. He rolled his shoulders, muscles flowing smooth under skin. The twitching in his face faded to almost nothing, his breath barely a murmur between his teeth.

Sigismund held his sword low, its point almost touching the sand. The chains around his wrists clinked as he settled into stillness. Khârn’s eyes flicked up to the plasteel links. He grinned, the light dancing in his eyes.

‘Imitation is flattery, I suppose,’ he said with a grin. ‘What was it that Jubal did?’

‘He cut them.’

‘Ha! I always liked him.’

‘He…’ Sigismund paused for a moment. ‘He asked if I was afraid of dropping my sword.’

‘Are you?’

‘No. He said the chains were like a prison.’

Khârn’s grin drained from his face. The skin of his scalp twitched around the Nails again, and a shiver ran through him. ‘Shall we carry on with this foolishness?’

Sigismund nodded, and a thunder-clash of steel replaced the silence. Once again, they were two figures whirling and striking at one another.

Khârn's axe rang against the sword, swept away and lashed back again. He was breathing hard. Spittle foamed at the corner of his mouth. His eyes were wide, the pupils black wounds in bloodshot white. Sigismund took one step backwards, deflecting each blow as it came. Khârn pulled away, growled, and hammered in again.

Sigismund parried lightly, and the axe whistled past his shoulder. He slammed the pommel of his sword into Khârn's forearm, and then at his face. The World Eater ducked and came up, and crashed his skull into Sigismund's forehead.

The headbutt slammed home but, even as it did, Sigismund dropped and turned, Khârn's wrist caught between his sword hilt and arm.

Khârn's momentum flipped him over and into the air. He twisted as he fell and landed on his feet, tensing to lunge back. Sigismund nudged the sword tip against the back of Khârn's neck.

Khârn bared his teeth. He was trembling, face twitching. He took a long, slow breath, and then nodded, once. Sigismund raised his sword. Blood clotted on his face; a deep gash marked the cheek under his left eye, and his nose was a mashed ruin.

'Now at least it looks like you have been fighting,' said Khârn.

'That was a foolish move. You committed too much.'

'I heard it worked for that bastard Sevatar. Besides, it is our way – when we are losing we make sure the other side bleeds more than us.'

'You are holding back. You always do.'

Khârn shook his head, face still twitching, and gestured at the circle of sand beneath their feet. 'No, brother. I am just not very good at… this…'

'I have stood with you in battle, Khârn. I have seen how you fight. Or have you forgotten?'

'I have not forgotten. But this is not a battlefield.'

'Your brothers fight here as though it is.'

'No, they do not. And neither do you. True war is not control, brother. It is not bound by a fighting pit's walls. It is the whirl of chance and fury, where there is nothing for you to cling on to. You fight because you must, because certainty drives you. Without that, what would you be?'

Sigismund stiffened. 'I will forgive the implication of your words, brother.'

Khârn shrugged, though there was a brittle edge to his voice. 'Always so sure. Always so much control, even in anger. But if the pillars of your world shook, if duty took you down a path where nothing was certain…' Khârn reached up and ran his hand over the Butcher's Nails bonded to his skull. 'What then?'

‘I would be nothing,’ said Sigismund.

‘I will forgive the implication of your *words, brother. And I don’t think you would be nothing without your chains of certainty. I think that, then, I truly would not want to face you. Even here.’*

‘No?’

‘No, because then I really would have to try and kill you.’

They advance down the corridor, armoured feet echoing in the still air.

‘They died too easily,’ says Morn. Sigismund does not need to look at her to see the contempt on her face. In truth, he agrees with her and the implication of what she says worries him, but the atmosphere inside the comet shrine worries him more. The air has become thicker. Static crackles along the bone-lined walls as though it were lightning earthed from a growing storm.

Then there are the shadows. Sometimes they seem to move. Sometimes Sigismund is sure that they grow when he looks away. It feels unnatural, like nothing he has felt before.

It concerns him. It concerns him very much.

Rann does not seem to notice. ‘What do you mean, “they died too easily”?’

Morn is about to reply, but Sigismund cuts her short.

‘They would have known that someone would come for them,’ he says. ‘The treachery of the Word Bearers must have been long in the making. Yet they met us in the outer halls with at least half their strength, died, and then melted away. Tell me, brother, does not that worry you?’

‘They resisted,’ Rann shrugs.

‘But not enough,’ says Morn.

‘Why would they do that?’

‘Sacrifice,’ she replies, after a heartbeat’s pause.

Sigismund feels something shiver across his skin. Morn’s word disturbs him, and he does not know why.

‘Sacrifice?’ asks Rann. ‘Like the followers of gods, before the coming of the Emperor’s truth? You can’t mean it.’

‘That is exactly what I mean.’

‘This is the Imperium. Even in rebellion those ways are long dead.’

‘This is no longer the age we thought it was, brother,’ Sigismund warns him. ‘Its truths are not the same, and neither are its weapons.’

‘But why?’

Sigismund raises his hand, his Templar brothers falling in silently behind him.

A set of doors lies ahead of them. Twice the height of a Space Marine, they gleam with bronze and polished bones. Sigismund blinks. There is a sudden and growing pressure behind his eyes as he looks at them. At the edge of his sight, the shadows seem to twitch again.

'Because this is a trap,' he replies. 'A trap whose dimensions we cannot see or fully understand. That is what you are thinking is it not, Lady Morn?'

'Yes.'

Morn steps closer to the doors, her bodyguards close in her wake. The plates of their armour hiss and click as they move. Rann follows, his fingers flexing on the haft of his axe.

'Then what would you suggest we do?' he asks.

Morn turns back to them. Behind the crystal of her visor, she is smiling. For a second, Sigismund almost smiles back.

'Why, the same as you have been itching to do since you saw those doors, Seneschal Rann,' she says. 'Kick them open.'

She runs at the high doors, pneumatics shuddering across her exoskeleton as she moves. She moves faster than Sigismund thought she ever could. The pistols in her hands are glowing as they gather charge. He launches after her, sword flashing with lightning as its energy field ignites.

Rann lets out a bark of laughter and annoyance, then follows, Templars and shield bearers closing around them.

Morn hits the door. Fragments of bone inlay and bronze spin through the air. They buckle open, ringing like a struck gong. Then Morn is out and into the flame-lit space beyond, her bodyguards at her shoulders, armoured plate flaring as it flows with their strides. Sigismund and Rann are only two paces behind. This is madness, but now it has begun there is only one way, and that way is forwards.

Sigismund crosses the threshold of the chamber. Red threat markers boil across his helmet view, his momentum driving him into a flat sprint.

He sees it then, waiting behind the translucent target runes.

Dozens of Space Marines ring the central point of the chamber. They are kneeling, heads bared and bowed. Each of them has a knife in his hands – spikes of black glass, iron or clouded crystal. At their centre a figure stands alone. His armour is black with crawling script. A casket of grey stone lies before him. Shadows and unclean light smoke from it. The air vibrates, pulsing to the drone of chanting voices.

The bodyguards' heavy cannons spin to firing speed. Morn strafes sideways,

her clawed feet clacking on the stone flags. Fire spits from the spinning rotor cannons. Rann's axe is high above his head. Morn's pistols are keening, circles of red energy blooming around their barrels in each instant before they fire.

The closest Word Bearers explode where they are kneeling. Their blood fizzes as it hits the polished floor. Corposant dances in the eyes of the skulls that line the ceilings and walls. The air is darkening, crawling with shadows cast by no light, but Sigismund has his gaze fixed upon the lone, standing figure.

The gunfire stops.

The blackened warrior looks up. The words inked across his face coil around his eyes like snakes. His mouth opens and he speaks a single word.

'*Peace*.'

The sound rolls through the twisting air. As one, every Word Bearer plunges his dagger up under his chin.

The world freezes. Light becomes dark, and dark turns to blinding day.

A single high note echoes out, extending endlessly, growing and obliterating all other sound. There is a long moment, a sickening, *soft* instant stretched like a sinew.

Then the Word Bearers are rising from the floor. Blood and smoke spray from their mouths. They are juddering, standing as though pulled up by wires. Their armour splits. Shapes step out from the cracked ceramite. Their flesh is pale and blood-slicked. Eyes, mouths, and scales form and dissolve across their bodies as these unnatural things take their first, shuddering steps in reality.

This… This is like nothing Sigismund has ever seen, like nothing that *should* be seen.

Only the warrior at the centre remains unchanged. His eyes are sunken and cold. They are the eyes of sorrow, not triumph.

Sigismund feels voices rattling inside his skull, pulling at his thoughts. The air is thick. He can taste acid in his mouth. Time has fled.

He can feel thoughts, and doubts, and memories bubbling against the force of his will.

He sees the face of his father, Rogal Dorn. The trust in his eyes.

He sees…

He sees only the path ahead of him. There is only the sword in his hand, only the enemy before him. There is only one feeling that he will allow.

Pure and bright, like a torch kindled in the darkness.

Fury.

He blinks. The world snaps back into place.

He is running forwards, aware that the Imperial Fists shield wall has broken, aware that this battle is now a whirling storm of blades, gunfire and claws. In spite of himself, he thinks of Khârn, of the World Eater wading into battle with rage stabbing at the back of his skull.

The creatures leap at him, claws extending at the ends of their limbs. His sword strikes the top of a half-formed head. It bursts apart, blood and pus misting the air. He can smell offal and incense even through his helm. Gunfire is roaring close by. The creatures' howls rise as they spin and leap forwards.

He sees Rann throw his axe, sees it spin end over end, sees the still-active power field drag lightning in its wake. It strikes the nearest beast and the thing staggers, black cracks spreading across its flesh. It shrieks. Rann unslings his second axe and runs to meet it.

But the creature is not dying, and neither are those that swarm back at him, clawing his shield down even as he fights to keep it steady.

Sigismund sees a talon of bone flash out and split Rann's faceplate effortlessly. Blood, bright and sudden, flicks into the air. Rann staggers.

Sigismund is a blur as he slices towards his brother. Something has wrapped around Rann's axe arm, something that rolls and glistens like chewed meat. He is falling now. The creatures surge forwards, blood and acid drooling from distended jaws.

Sigismund cleaves through the last circle of creatures. The cut is backhanded, left to right, like a scythe reaping corn. He feels his blade tremble as it passes through flesh and bone. A space opens before him, and he is stepping into it, stepping over the fallen shape of Rann. He sweeps his sword back, and the creatures shriek at him again as they recoil.

He glances down. Rann is a ruin of streaked armour and clotted blood. Red bubbles are foaming from the split faceplate of his helm.

'Get up,' says Sigismund.

Rann pulls himself to his feet. His axe and shield are still in his hands. 'I deserved to die to that…' He sways for a moment, then shakes himself, scattering blood like a dog shaking water from its fur.

The creatures part before them, pulling back like a retreating tide of unwholesome flesh. The din of battle still sings in the air, but for a second it seems more distant.

The blackened Word Bearer stands before them. Smoke peels from him as he steps forwards, and the surrounding creatures chitter and moan like curbed animals.

The warrior's voice slides over the words like blood over broken glass. 'It was not supposed to be you, Sigismund, First Son of Dorn. You were not supposed to be here. Another death waited for you.' He pauses, turns, his hand extending towards the open stone casket on the dais.

'Be silent, traitor!' Rann spits, and lunges forwards, fresh blood scattering from his wounds as he charges. Sigismund begins to move an instant later.

Something is moving inside the casket, something that writhes like snakes in black oil. The Word Bearer's hand closes around it. Grey lightning whips up his arm, the marks upon his armour crawling as the edges of his body blur.

Rann raises his shield, and hacks down with his axe. Sigismund hears the grunt of effort, and sees the puff of blood on Rann's breath. The blow is not neat, not elegant. It is the oldest of the cuts of war – a killing stroke, swift and direct.

The Word Bearer turns, outline and shape blurring with speed. Something strikes Rann's shield.

But the shield does not break. It simply becomes *nothing*.

Rann slumps back with the force of its unmaking, folding like a cut rope. The dark warrior sweeps the weapon back – its form is changing, flowing between shapes, solidifying and dissolving. It hisses as the Word Bearer brings it up to deliver the death blow. Rann is motionless on the floor, wisps of darkness now seeping from his wounds.

Sigismund's sword blocks the cut. White light splinters the air. The two weapons grind against each other.

'The fire and wind spoke of your end, Templar,' hisses the Word Bearer.

Sigismund pulls away. The dark warrior drags his weapon back. Its shape congeals into a long serrated sword, blood weeping from its toothed edge.

'Your death was ordained. A grave of stars waited for you. But here you are.'

The jagged sword whips forwards. Sigismund steps past and the Word Bearer's cut follows him. He twists to avoid it, and sees that his opponent's guard is open.

He lunges. All his intent, all his being and years of training are carried in that thrust.

The Word Bearer blinks aside, his shape and form skipping between moments as though he had not moved. A black silhouette remains where he was, fading in the air like a bruise.

He ripostes. The sword changes as it descends – it is a black mace now, heavy-headed and barbed, a frozen explosion of night, trailing fire after it.

Sigismund's sword catches the blow, but too late. The impact lifts him from his feet. He feels bones grinding in his sword arm as the shock reverberates through

him. He lands on the floor, spinning quickly to rise.

Creatures skitter out of his way, cackling in countless voices. Damaged servos howl in his armour joints. Red warnings light his helmet display. Inside his head, he is fighting to hold on to his focus, to hold on to the shackled fury that is his fire.

The Word Bearer is less than five strides away, the mace held in his hands, the dark pits of his eyes unmoving. He rolls his neck and shoulders, slowly, casually. The movement reminds Sigismund of Khârn.

'Have you told your father?' the Word Bearer croons, and a chill flicks through Sigismund as he straightens, painfully. 'Have you confessed to him why you forsook your duty to return to Terra?'

The words echo through him. It has been months since he encountered Keeler on the *Phalanx*, since she had shown him what was to come – since he had demanded to return to Terra with Rogal Dorn.

And in all that time, her words have not left his thoughts.

But he has shared them with no one.

'There are no secrets in the warp,' says the Word Bearer. 'I see your heart, and I see your fate. I am shriven, and the gods have placed your ending in my hands. You will not leave this place alive. You will not live to see your primarch fail. You will not live to see this false Imperium fall. The witch lied to you, Templar. She lied.'

Sigismund feels cold winding through his limbs. He is stepping forwards, his sword rising, but it feels separate from him, like a dead limb chained to his hands. He hears Keeler's voice, distant, calm, speaking to him from the corridors of memory.

'*You must choose your future and the future of your Legion, Sigismund, First Captain of the Imperial Fists*.'

Sigismund feels the blood beat in his veins. The Word Bearer is moving, so fast that it seems unreal. Shadow and oily smoke drags again in his wake. The voices come then, thrown from the blank night of the past.

'Duty. It binds us, it keeps us, it guides us.'

'A blade is freedom, son of Dorn. Chain it, and you chain yourself.'

He remembers the question that he had asked Keeler on the *Phalanx*.

What is *the other path?*

Sigismund raises his sword, but the black mace crashes into his chest.

'Death, Sigismund,' Keeler had said. *'Death and sacrifice.'*

Blood, and darkness.

The world is crumpling around him – becoming small, becoming a pit of pain to drown in.

He cannot see, and the only sound is the thunder in his ears.

One of his hearts has stopped. The other beats on, slicing his life away with every slowing pulse. He cannot feel the sword in his hand, cannot feel the shattered plates of his armour.

'We exist to serve.'

'And there is nothing more?'

'Nothing more.'

'No matter where it leads us, or to what end.'

'But is it true that he has never *been defeated, never lost a duel, never failed?'*

'Never.'

'But if the pillars of your world shook, if duty took you down a path where nothing was certain… What then?'

And then the world roars at him in colour and sound, deafening, blindingly bright.

He can see.

A warrior stands above him, the black stains upon his armour crawling away into the air. The mace in his hands is flickering, jumping to other forms and then back. Creatures with flayed-beast faces sway and spin behind him. The strobing fire of battle lights a domed roof. The warrior's mouth cracks open, smoke breathing from between pale teeth. His lips are burning as he speaks.

'Peace.'

He swings the black mace above his head.

Sigismund's hand closes on the sword chained to it. Wounds are open across his body. Muscles shudder. His lone heart hammers in his chest. The mace howls as it rushes down to meet him.

In that moment, he stabs upwards.

The tip of the sword strikes the Word Bearer just beneath the breastplate. The blade shivers in Sigismund's grip as it slices through armour, flesh and bone, and jabs into the power plant on the Word Bearer's back.

With sudden, explosive force, volatile chemicals and energy vent from severed cooling tubes and power conduits. Fire engulfs the Word Bearer's body, stealing away any cry of surprise or pain. Then his ribcage blows out.

The Word Bearer falls backwards, flames and sparks burning away his blood before it can even fall to the floor.

Sigismund rises, pulling the sword free, reverses his grip and stabs downwards. The point rams into the Word Bearer's mouth and through his skull, into the polished stone beneath.

He stands for a second, swaying, trying to focus through the blood and the pain. The battle is dissolving around him. The creatures are staggering, limbs and sinew quivering as though some vital link has been severed. An ethereal wind is spinning through the chamber, green flames flaring from the bodies of the collapsing creatures.

He can see his brother Templars now. Many lie bloody amongst the heaps of hacked flesh, but others are advancing towards him, firing and slicing the creatures even as they are pulled apart by the dying winds.

Morn is walking amongst the fallen, flanked by her bodyguards. Her exoskeleton is wheezing, and she limps with a clatter of broken gears. She pauses to snap a beam of energy at a twitching shape made of slick muscle and half-formed feathers.

The bodyguards move forwards, lifting the stone casket from the dais, and hurry to where Sigismund stands above the dead Word Bearer. The black weapon still rests in the warrior's hands, its malformed shape fuming like newly forged iron.

'Take the blade to the gunship,' Morn says to her bodyguards. 'Burn the rest.'

Sigismund is not listening. In his chest, his heart still beats out a rhythm in blood – a rhythm like the clash of swords. He looks to where Rann lies: unmoving, but groaning quietly, the axe still in his hand.

He *must* live. He must.

Sigismund pulls his sword from the Word Bearer's skull. It slides free, but the flesh around it is charring and powdering away to ash, which lifts on the unnatural breeze.

'Your duty is done, Templar,' says Morn from close beside him.

His bloodstained tabard stirs in the air. The chains about his wrist clink. Slowly, the joints of his armour creaking, he raises the sword. His oaths of moment are fulfilled, and he touches the blade to his forehead.

'No,' he says. 'It is never done.'

Sigismund leads the attack on the comet shrine

DISTANT ECHOES OF OLD NIGHT

Rob Sanders

‘And they called him… *Death*.’ Brother-Chaplain Morgax Murnau’s sermon hissed across the open vox-channel. His straight, black hair framed his pale face like curtains, parting to reveal a ghoulish leer. Standing amongst the drop pod descent cages, with his fat, grinning skull-helm clasped beneath one arm, the Chaplain spat his words into the clunky receiver of a master-vox. ‘The living embodiment of the end. The darkness we dread. The release we crave. The future we fear.’

The Death Guard Chaplain stepped out onto the ramp-egress. The drop pod sat in the mire like a bulbous, rivet-plated tick. Everything oozed about him. The Chaplain’s slick oratory echoed among the petrified ferrouswoods, his dark words drifting over the sap-saturated morass like a mellifluous madness. The sermon was punctuated by the brief and occasional blast of stabiliser jets, as the drop pod’s machine-spirit fought to keep the transport upright and from sinking into the swamp.

‘He brings you no more than your mortality demands. We play at perpetuity but we were not built for forever. Warmth will leave our great bodies. Our hearts will beat to empty echoes. Blood will sit stagnant in our veins and our flesh shall rot. Accept this.’

Murnau peered out across the bubbling mire. The ground was sodden with decay. It was waterlogged and crawling with parasites, gigapedes and clinker-shell lice. Ghostly clouds of midges swarmed and swirled across the percolating surface, filling the foetid air with the drone of a billion tiny wings.

Murnau watched a drowning avian struggle in the muck; it flapped its sticky wings in frantic futility. Its hatchet beak had once gone to work on the heavy

metal ferrouswood of titanic trunks but now it thrashed uselessly at the slime of microorganisms already breaking down its flesh.

This place, Algonquis, had once been a verdant forest moon blessed with flocks of colourful beasts. They had roosted in the treetops and filled the hinterlands with harsh song. Below, sparse logging communities and indentured plantation workers had harvested ferrouswood with industrial chainaxe and saw. The dense timber was then used to supply off-world dustmills, workshops and factories in which some of the most durable lumber in the Imperium was put to myriad uses.

The forest moon had been part of a sub-sector cornucopia of agri worlds and mercantile trade-route hubs until the Death Guard frigate *Barbarus' Sting* blistered through the region, visiting orbital decimation on world after Imperial world. Murnau had observed the ship's commander select different varieties of apocalyptic biological weaponry for each victim-world, with the dreadful expertise of a true connoisseur. Engineered blights, atmospheric contaminants and galactic plagues long thought eradicated; all resurrected by Moritat Phorgal's renegade Mechanicum adepts.

Agri world crops cankered in their continental fields. Droves of bloated livestock were impaled from the inside out by the spore shafts of rampant fungal infestations. Clear, teeming oceans became vast expanses of sepia swill.

For Algonquis, Phorgal had reserved an ecological decimant so destructive and voracious that even Murnau was surprised at how swiftly the forest moon had turned from a world of evergreen promise into a rotting ball of filth and corruption. Shrivelled needles rained to the forest floor while the great trunks of the ferrouswoods bled small lakes of sap, turning the rich, black soil into a sickly mire. Aggressive species of fungus ripped up through the pulp and bark of the trees, felling many of the titanic growths. Others remained as part of a petrified, skeletal forest of colossal stakes that pointed accusingly at the skies. Moulds and black mildew covered everything in a blanket of competing microorganisms as local insect populations exploded, feeding off the carcass of a dying world.

'Hear me, Latham,' the Chaplain snarled into the vox-receiver. 'You and your brother Imperial Fists are already dead – you just don't know it yet. Where the sons of Mortarion walk, the will of the Death Lord prevails. We bring famine, pestilence, war and absolute destruction in its many forms. We bring the apocalypse in Mortarion's name. We are the Death Guard, Captain Latham. We are the end to all.' Murnau allowed his snarl to contort into an agonising smile.

'But,' the Chaplain said, raising a ceramite fingertip, 'don't make it too easy for us. Although we are here to escort you to the most final of destinations, death is

meaningless without the sweet regret of a life well-lived. When my Destroyers take your life – and take it they will – I want you to have given your best. For the ache of loss to echo about your chest with the rattle of your last breath. Nothing pleases my lord more than placing the seeds of doubt in mortal hearts, seeds that bloom into gardens of darkness and despair, before having his instruments of death tear those hearts from forlorn and desperate chests. We are the instrument, captain. Know that no fortification or defence can save you. Know that no rescue is coming. Know that your Emperor has abandoned you.'

Murnau's helmet-vox chirped. He slammed the vox-receiver onto its wall-mounted cradle and slipped his battle-helm over his head.

'Murnau here,' he hissed.

'*I have Moritat Phorgal for you, Brother-Chaplain.*'

'Proceed.'

Murnau snatched a drum-fed bolt pistol from the storage rack and holstered the weapon at his belt. With greater reverence he took his staff of office – his crozius arcanum – from its devotional harness. The short, adamantium staff was capped with the sculpture of a skeletal angel, its curved wings touching tip to tip and creating a brutal, spiked head to the revered weapon.

Stepping off the ramp and into the mire, the murky floodwaters lapped like syrup against Murnau's armoured knees. The Chaplain felt the saturated earth below take hold of his boots in its sucking grip, though his power-armoured tread was more than enough to break him free of the bog. Stomping through the filthy shallows, the Chaplain emerged from the shadow of the drop pod and set out through the petrified forest.

'*This is Phorgal,*' the helmet-vox crackled. The officer's voice was a distant presence, like the echo about a tomb.

'My brother in both life and death,' Murnau returned. 'The pod-relay is experiencing interference.'

'*It's not the relay,*' Phorgal told him. '*The* Barbarus' Sting *breaks orbit.*'

'You're leaving orbit?' Murnau asked.

'*Long-range augur-scans have revealed a victim flotilla entering the neighbouring system.*'

'Freighters?'

'*Granary ships – bulk container vessels accompanied by an Imperial Army escort cruiser,*' the Moritat informed him. '*We are en route to bring the primarch's judgement upon them.*'

'And we, to Dorn's dogs down on the forest moon's surface,' Murnau assured

him.

As Murnau trudged through the mire, languid ripples rolling through the sap-waters, he felt the rotten pulp of fallen ferrouswoods crumble beneath the soles of his boots. The blackened, emaciated remnants still standing pierced the pestilent fog that hung like a shroud. The sticky surface of his battleplate became a trap for gangly flies and midges, and soon the suit was covered in dying insects.

He saw a distant and momentary flash in the forest murk, followed by a wave of heat that disturbed the mist and registered on his suit's auto-senses. The broken blanket of fog revealed the Chaplain's destination – ahead, reaching up amongst the disease-riddled trees, Murnau could make out the shattered outline of a crashed vessel.

The massive debris section was one of five that the Death Guard had located upon the swampy Algonquisian surface. When the *Barbarus' Sting* had encountered the Imperial Fists frigate *Xanthus* making its quiet approach through the decimated agri worlds, Moritat Phorgal had unleashed all weapons upon the loyalist vessel. It had tumbled to the moon's foetid surface, breaking up as it fell.

Phorgal had despatched the Chaplain to the crash site. His orders had been unequivocal: there were to be no survivors.

'*Murnau,*' the Moritat rasped across the vox. '*Fenestra still hasn't deciphered the astropathic partial transmitted from the* Xanthus.'

'That's… disappointing. We should have that bolt-magnet freak skinned alive. It disgusts me that we have to rely upon such degenerate humanity for our long-range communications.'

'*But there it is,*' Phorgal said.

Murnau heard the officer take a sudden and rasping intake of breath. It was usually the herald of some kind of reproach; many times had Murnau heard it, before the Moritat rebuked a legionary inferior. '*The fact is, Brother Murnau, there would be no astropathic partial if your squad had brought the enemy to their ceramite knees.*'

Murnau bit back an involuntary explanation. He would offer no excuses: he was a Chaplain of the Death Guard. In the darkness, he was Mortarion's all-seeing eyes. In the silence, he was the primarch's burning words. Where uncertainty reigned, Murnau was surety of the Death Lord's vengeance… and Murnau was certain that uncertainty reigned in Vitas Phorgal's hearts. Undoubtedly, this was why the Moritat liked to do the Warmaster's bidding from a command-deck

throne.

'*Finish them, Morgax,*' Phorgal carped. '*Finish them now.*'

'What of the nature of the communiqué?' Murnau asked, changing the subject.

'*Fenestra says that it was coded,*' the Death Guard officer confided, '*but not like any Legion code the witch has seen before. It is certainly not one used by the Imperial Fists. It doesn't sound like a Legiones Astartes code at all.*'

'Destination?'

'*Sol,*' Phorgal replied, the Moritat's voice suddenly laced with static. They were losing their vox signal. '*The vessel's destination, given the frigate's last recorded trajectory.*'

'Intriguing,' Murnau said. 'Well, the *Xanthus* was carrying something. Intelligence. Materiel. Supplies. Dorn will fortify his position, as is his nature. The Imperial Fists will hunker down and try to weather the coming storm. Let them try, I say, and let the Death Guard show them the futility of their lost cause.' He thought for a moment. 'Honoured Moritat, should the parameters of the mission be changed and this Terra-bound cargo be located and reported back to the Warmaster's strategists?'

'*No,*' Phorgal crackled. '*We leave such subtlety to our cousins in the Twentieth Legion. This is war, and Mortarion's sons deal in death, not in the gathering of meaningless details. Your orders remain. No survivors, Morgax. Do you hear me?*'

'It will be done,' the Chaplain assured him.

'*The* Barbarus' Sting *will return for you shortly,*' Phorgal said. '*Then the tedium of the warp, and on to the fabricator moons of Uniplex Minora. Finish it, and make it quick.*'

As Murnau stepped through the sap drizzle and the shallows he saw another flash. His suit registered the heat backwash of a powerful weapon – it was coming from the shattered hull-section. The fog and midge swarms thinned, and the Chaplain took in the full majesty of Phorgal's void-victory. The remnant was a mauled wreck. All that remained of the *Xanthus* was a midships gunnery section, the gothic majesty of which was dragging one end of the wreckage below the broiling swamp surface, as compartment after compartment flooded with filth.

Murnau took in the objective with a tactician's eye. With one end of the shattered section sinking, the other was rising like a metal mountain. The Chaplain cast his optics across the exposed guts of the vessel, wracked with fires

and leaking various gases and hydraulic oils. The rents and tears in the crumpled hull plating were providing the loyalist forces with firing slits and opportunities to keep the assaulting Death Guard at bay. The stuttering fire of lascarbines and boltguns lay waiting for them.

Cycling the vox-channels, Murnau found Sergeant Grull Gorphon barking savage orders to his squad. The Death Guard had taken position about the starboard flank of the frigate. It had suffered by far the worst impact damage and the Imperial Fists had done a frustrating job of fortifying the airlocks and barricading the hull breaches on the other approaches.

The Chaplain found Gorphon's warriors moving between the bolt-chewed trunks of petrified giants. Like Murnau, they had found a grim thrill in their surroundings; about them a world was dying, and from that finality a new life was emerging. It was a slithering, rank, appalling form of life, but life all the same. With the enemy intent on consolidating within the crashed *Xanthus* and with an entire frigate's supply of ammunition at their disposal, the Death Guard were committed to leaving them no safe ground.

Morgax Murnau believed that for every job there was a perfect tool. The *Barbarus' Sting* carried one such tool among its Death Guard contingent. A blunt and uncompromising tool of ruthless decimation – Gorphon's Destroyer squad, known as 'the Graven'.

The Destroyers attracted the worst from among the Legiones Astartes. Space Marines that Legion officers kept on a tight leash: the empty, the wilfully destructive, those for whom there was no quarter, those for whom the galaxy must burn. Where necessity dictated, however, the singular talents of these warriors were put to deadly use. Weapons of mass destruction were recovered from dark armoury depths, and the Destroyers' appetite for annihilation was whetted by the prospect of battle, bloody and furious.

No survivors, Phorgal had commanded. And Murnau had sent for the Graven.

Sloshing through the bolt-plucked mire, Murnau came upon Zorrak – one of the Graven's heavy weapons specialists. His armour was unpainted but filth-splattered to a fitting camouflage. With his backpack against the rotting trunk of a petrified ferrouswood, the Destroyer clutched the ungainly bulk of a missile launcher to his chest. Zorrak nodded his acknowledgement to the passing Chaplain – the movement parted the darkness of his long, matted hair, revealing the raw mask beneath. The whites of his eyes burned with a manic agitation from the patchwork of the Destroyer's face, and his scabbed lips curled around a devilish smile. Zorrak jangled with the custom-loaded reserve warheads hanging

from his belt.

These were Terran-devised nightmares, terror weapons of the gene-war darkness of Old Night. With material harvested from decommissioned fusion reactors, the warheads were so radioactive that it was a wonder that Zorrak didn't glow in the dark. Instead, he and his comrades bore the horrible cost of handling such hideous weaponry in the burns and scarring afflicting their battle-bred forms.

The Chaplain leaned back as a stream of las-fire tore through the mildew-threaded bark at Zorrak's shoulder. The Destroyer gritted his gleaming white teeth before throwing his armoured body around – he leaned into the missile launcher and aimed it at the shattered frigate. Missile after missile tore out of the bucking launcher, and the derelict vessel became enveloped in a cluster of blinding halos as the localised blasts of the rad-missiles ripped through the hull and vessel structure. Some tore rents and twisted cavities into much larger breach-points for the waiting Death Guard. Others set off internal chains of explosions that migrated through the wreckage, forcing Legion serfs from their sentry-points and shrouding the interior with intensely toxic radioactive material.

Stomping between the cover of the largest ferrouswoods, the mire threatening to hold on to every bootfall, the Chaplain received the greeting of individual Destroyers in the form of mad eyes and sneers of ulcerated delight. All of Gorphon's squad carried the radiation burns and sickly hangdog expressions of their calling. Moving in on the shattered section, the Destroyers splashed from trunk to trunk, chunky bolt pistols in each gauntlet and pausing only to lob rad-grenades into the derelict. They riddled the sinking section with alternating streams of brute-calibre rounds, roaring their sick glee at the loyalist attempts to cut them down.

From the wreckage of the *Xanthus* came the boom of a colossal carriage locking mechanism. Murnau knew that sound. His helmet vox-channel became a cacophony of warnings.

'Incoming!' he heard Sergeant Gorphon bellow to his men.

The Chaplain cast his optics across the smashed flank of the frigate. The magna-bore barrel of a single cannon had been rolled out from the darkness of a mangled gunport. Somehow Captain Latham had got one of the remaining cannons operational and his survivors had manhandled it into position on its warped carriage.

There was no cover that could save Murnau from the plasma blast – the open ground and smouldering ferrouswood stumps testified to that. The cannon was

devastating in its capabilities but clumsy without a calibrated way to aim the weapon. From the angle of the gargantuan barrel, Murnau estimated only a grazing vector at best. The improvised crew behind the beast would not want to waste the shot and the Chaplain assumed the loyalists would rather aim high than blast uselessly into the mire.

'Do your worst,' Murnau hissed through his teeth. Calmly, he knelt down in the shallows and bowed his skull-helm. 'For death is nothing to fear–'

Everything went white.

The roar of ship-to-ship weaponry shook him to his bones. His battleplate's auto-senses momentarily clipped out, and the sap about him boiled to a bank of filthy steam.

Before his optics had even been restored, Murnau leapt back to his feet, a gaunt grin of self-satisfaction on his face. As he predicted, the plasma beam had passed above their position and blasted its way through the petrified ferrouswoods beyond. The barrel of the great weapon had gone, shunted back on its colossal carriage, but through the open gunport Murnau sensed he was being regarded with disappointed eyes.

Moving on through the syrupy murk, Murnau found an approving Sergeant Gorphon waiting for him. Two horribly scarred members of the Graven, Brother-Destroyers Khurgul and Gholic, were yelling ripe abuse at the sinking derelict from the necrotic trunks, goading the Imperial Fists within. They hammered the open and more vulnerable areas of the wreck with their monstrous pistols and tossed clutches of grenades at the structure, the detonations of which bathed the swamp in a radioactive haze that killed the flies and made the shattered hull of the *Xanthus* shimmer. For a few minutes now, Murnau had suffered the background crackle of radioactivity, filtered through his battle plate. His suit told him what he already knew – that death, in one of its myriad forms, hung heavily over the whole area.

'Inspiring, Chaplain,' the Destroyer sergeant said as Murnau took his final trudging steps through the las-bolt molested waters. Like the legionary Destroyers, Grull Gorphon was a wretched mess of radiation scarring and weeping rawness. His bare head was like a scab that had cracked, and sores bled rancid fluid down his gaunt cheeks. The bulbous power fist crackling at his side further emphasised the sergeant's macabre appearance, making him appear lopsided, almost hunchbacked.

'Status report, sergeant.' The Chaplain spoke with a focusing harshness, but if his tone bothered Gorphon, the Destroyer certainly didn't let it show.

‘The Fists have the derelict section locked down tighter than Dorn’s arse cheeks,’ the sergeant related coarsely. ‘Barricades and bulkheads have been torched shut. A lot of bonded crew members – I’d say about forty – hold fire arcs on the approaches and they have a starboard cannon powered and operational. All that before the real problem of Oriel Latham and four of his veterans holed up in there.’

‘Our losses?’ Murnau asked.

‘Three,’ Gorphon told him with casual resignation. ‘That damned gun claimed Rork on its first shot. Latham and his bastard brothers took Urzl-kal and Ortag as they reconnoitred for unsecured entry points. The good news is that Latham is running out of time. The section is sinking and the more swamp water it takes on, the faster it’s going under. Between that and the radioactive hellhole my Destroyers have created between decks, I expect Latham the hero will be giving up his ground soon.’

Murnau gave Gorphon the searing optics of his skull-helm.

‘I’m afraid that’s not good enough, sergeant,’ the Chaplain hissed, some of his former manic morbidity creeping back into his voice. ‘Phorgal has stepped up our schedule. The Moritat has sent Dorn’s loyal dogs a long way down the crow road, but it is down to us to see them to the end of their journey. We don’t have long before extraction. Do you hear me, Gorphon?’

The sergeant nodded slowly, but couldn’t prevent a grin of lunacy spreading across his scabby lips.

‘We can take the *Xanthus*,’ he said, ‘but it will be bloody. Our losses will be high.’

The Chaplain nodded. ‘Do you think the Death Lord intended you to accompany him into the forever?’

An involuntary snort became a dark chuckle shared between the two warriors. ‘Do you think he intended it for any of us?’ Murnau added, as much to himself as Gorphon and his Destroyers. ‘Assemble your squad for a direct assault on the enemy vessel, sergeant. We shall create our own entry point and take Latham and his Fists by force.’

‘Yes, Brother-Chaplain,’ Gorphon replied with dead-eyed assurance before returning to his suit vox. ‘Graven,’ the Destroyer sergeant announced across the channel. ‘Fall back to my position immediately. The word is given – boarding action. Zorrak and Hadar-Gul, provide cover for the approach. Barrage. Full spread.’

Murnau drew his pistol and waited amongst the ferrouswoods as the remainder

of the Graven worked their way through the las-bolts and shallows to their sergeant's position. As ordered, Zorrak and Hadar-Gul lit up the *Xanthus* with a blinding and incessant barrage of rad-missiles, the Destroyers sidling through the filth like crabs. Murnau fancied the derelict rocked under the combined barrage of detonations – under such a devastating distraction the Fists and their sniping bondsmen and crew could create little in the way of murderous opportunity.

Sliding their pistols to automatic, Khurgul and Gholic came out of their cover to provide a curtain of bolt-fire for Gorphon. The Destroyer sergeant's power fist spat and sizzled with dark energy as he closed his great, metal digits and smashed at the ferrouswood trunk with his seething knuckles. He struck again and again, shredding through blackened pulp and grain and breaking through the base of the forest-moon giant. The ancient and colossal tree gave out with a shrieking crack. The Death Guard watched it topple and followed its petrified canopy with their eyes as it landed on the derelict. The top of the heavy metallic trunk tore along the mangled section of hull-shielding, before coming to rest in a new, gaping breach.

'To me, Graven!' Gorphon roared. Murnau held his crozius arcanum above the sergeant, which the Destroyer took as his blessing on their endeavour. Bowing before it, he climbed up through the splintered trunk and took a heavy run at the incline created by the felled ferrouswood.

The Graven followed one after another. Each of the Death Guard slapped one of their brute pistols back into their holsters and drew their blades. The Graven's chainblades were short, broad and falchion-shaped: the weapon of choice for hacking apart enemy defenders, hiding in the confined spaces and shadows of a crashed vessel.

As Murnau's ceramite boots chewed up the necrotic bark of the fallen tree, the Chaplain could feel the hammering of the Fists' bolt-rounds into the underside of the trunk.

By the time the Chaplain reached the hull of the *Xanthus,* Gorphon and his Destroyers were already inside. Leading with his pistol, and using the head of the crozius to move aside curtains of wiring and bleeding hydraulic lines, Murnau followed the swift progress of the Legion Destroyer squad.

Murnau was delighted to find that everything had already died in their meandering path. The shattered section was a torturous labyrinth of inclined passages, smashed chambers and crash-warped superstructure. There were bodies everywhere – the rag-doll remains of the bonded crew, unfortunates who

had not survived the brutal descent and forest-scarring impact. Lamps flickered feebly with dying power and the gloom was thick with radioactive haze; inside the derelict vessel, every surface was covered with powdered fallout from the terrible rad-barrage. As the Chaplain moved through the twisted darkness, it dusted his midnight plate.

Murnau stepped through a messy hole in a bulkhead wall. Metal dribbled down the opening – here the Destroyers had used their melta bombs to blast through to a sealed-off section of the ship. Pushing through the trickles of hardening metal, Murnau found himself among carnage.

Here were fresh bodies, most missing limbs. They were riddled with ragged holes, blasted aside in the savage rush of the boarding action. The frigate's crew and the Imperial Fists bondsmen were all dead or dying. Many clutched lascarbines and pistols. The Chaplain could imagine the staccato light show of beams and las-bolts that had met the Destroyers and lit up the darkness between the decks.

Once blade to blade, the mortal crew had provided no resistance at all. They had been too sick, too weak. They had done as instructed by their masters and held the Warmaster's forces at bay, but they had done so on their knees, begging for death. The misery and suffering that had been experienced aboard the *Xanthus* was almost palpable. Murnau found himself smiling behind his faceplate.

The deck was slick with vomit and other bodily fluids, including spreading pools of freshly spilled blood, and many bodies lay with broken limbs already trussed and bandages wrapped around balding heads. The terrible evidence of the Destroyers' arsenal was everywhere – radiation poisoning, ulceration, blistering, red-raw skin beneath robes that had been long-abandoned under raging fever. Even if the Graven hadn't butchered and blasted their way through the section by hand, the frigate's bondsmen would have died anyway. Gorphon had been right: the survivors were running out of time. The sons of Mortarion had simply provided a blessed release and alleviated their suffering with their screeching blades and bolt-rounds.

While his optics feasted upon these past atrocities, Murnau's vox-feed kept him appraised of new ones unfolding on the decks below. There were screams of anger, futility and death frequently drowned out by grenades, the gunning of blades and the thunder of pistol fire. Gone were the Destroyers' coarse insults, insanity and hilarity. The Death Guard were implacable, unstoppable. Gorphon's macabre killers were silent and driven, eating up the carnage and the sweet

ambience of endings.

The loyalists', and indeed their own.

The Chaplain found his first Space Marine casualty of the engagement on an inverted stairwell – Khurgul's impassive advance had taken him into the path of a stray krak grenade. His Mark III plate had been torn by the blast like a hastily opened rations can. His helm was shattered, and only half the Destroyer's head remained within it. Lying on his side, his lifeblood cascading down through a grille landing, Khurgul blinked incomprehension at Murnau. He endlessly repeated his attempt to attach a fresh drum-magazine to his empty pistol, failing again and again.

'Peace, brother,' the Chaplain told the Destroyer. Swinging his staff of office, Murnau brought the head of the crozius down on what remained of the Space Marine's own.

Pulling the stylised and serrated wings of the weapon from the Destroyer's smashed skull, Murnau followed the Graven's path of destruction down through the charnel-house decks and into the sinking bowels of the frigate. Over the vox-link he heard a new sound: the deep, throaty bark of bolter fire. The Graven had located their quarry – Dorn's dogs, the *Xanthus*' complement of Imperial Fists legionaries, holding out as only the VII Legion could in the dark depths of the shattered section.

Dropping down through another melta-blasted hole in the deck and passing through a buckled bulkhead, Murnau found himself in a maze of twisted metal: sealed-off sections, presumably breached and flooded; barricaded passageways and entire decks collapsed in upon one another. Murnau's suit lamps lent a ghostly illumination to the devastation. No light penetrated this deep into the ship, leading the Chaplain to believe that they were below the surface level of the swamp.

As he descended, Murnau found two more fallen Destroyers and the barb-mauled body of the Imperial Fist that had taken their lives. The bolt-chatter was closer now, although the frenetic exchange of gunfire was bounced around the torturous architecture of the crashed vessel. Gorphon and his Destroyers must have forced the loyalists out from their fortified hold-point, blasting their way down into the belly of the frigate. The Imperial Fists had run out of vessel to retreat into. They had gone as far as they were going to go.

The Chaplain found the Graven gathered on the steep incline of a maintenance corridor. The deck below was alight with angry fires that drove back the darkness with a white-blue brilliance. The Death Guard were involved in a

furious firefight with a handful of the enemy, punctuated by the detonations of rad-grenades. The returned fire from below was wild but insistent. Still, it surprised Murnau to find the Destroyers there, their storming advance having ground to a halt.

Sergeant Gorphon was braced across a hatchway leading to a tool store. He was holding his great power fist up to shield his ghoulish face as bolt-fire tore at the surrounding architecture.

'Status report, sergeant,' the Chaplain demanded. 'Why have you not advanced?'

'Three,' the Destroyer stated, 'perhaps four Fists are holding the gunnery deck below. The retreat point is fortified and seems well-supplied with ammunition from the frigate's armoury. We, on the other hand, are down to our last clips.'

'Latham…' Murnau spat, but the sergeant shook his scalded features. Stepping back he allowed Murnau's suit lamps to brush the outline of an armoured corpse beyond. The body had been laid carefully in the corner of the storeroom. The figure was helmetless, and plate markings identified the Space Marine as an Imperial Fists captain.

Captain Oriel Latham, wearing the ghastly expression of one unexpectedly confronting a sudden and violent death.

'You?' the Chaplain asked.

Gorphon shook his head. 'Killed in the crash, we think.'

Murnau nodded slowly. *Latham, dead*… with the resistance being led by… *who?* Another legionary? A resourceful sergeant or second?

He looked to Gorphon. 'Other ways in?'

The Death Guard sergeant shook his head.

'We can't force our way through?' Murnau hissed with sudden annoyance. The Chaplain could feel victory almost within his throttling grasp.

'We don't have the numbers to weather that kind of punishment,' Gorphon told him, shrugging one seemingly hunched shoulder. 'Besides, such losses are unnecessary. The Imperial Fists will probably present themselves to us shortly.'

Murnau didn't like where the Destroyer sergeant's smug self-satisfaction was taking them. 'And why would they do that?' the Chaplain muttered.

Gorphon unhooked a fat bomb-canister that was hanging from the bottom of his pack.

'Because they'll die if they don't,' Gorphon announced amongst the incessant chunter of echoing gunfire. He tossed the canister over to the Chaplain. Murnau caught the weapon and turned it over in his gauntlets.

Phosphex.

The Legiones Astartes had many brute weapons at their disposal. Some were favoured for their surgical precision; others for their simple, destructive potential. As living weapons of the burgeoning Imperium, legionaries appreciated the respective merits of the death-dealing tools of their trade. In many monastery bases and Legion battle-barges there were certain weapons that gathered dust, unused by those unwilling to embrace their destructive potential. For many squads and officers, the use of rad-weaponry and chemical devastants was beyond the pale. They were distant echoes of a dark past, and forgotten remnants of the anarchy from which a stable Imperium was ultimately born. For a Legion's Destroyers they were the weapons of choice – weapons that inflicted horror and sowed fear in enemy ranks.

Following the phosphorescent nightmare of its exothermic detonation, phosphex would hang like a poison that burned and seeped its way into anything unfortunate enough to come into contact with it. As far as could be determined, it would never decay.

'You have deployed this weapon?' Murnau asked.

'Rolled two canisters down there,' Gorphon told him with raw-faced pride. 'You missed the screams, Chaplain.'

'That's unfortunate. I wish you hadn't done that.'

'Why?' the sergeant asked absently as he risked a brief glance down the slanting maintenance corridor. The firefight was dying away to nothing, a testament to the toxic inferno that had swept through the lower deck.

'Because our mission requires us to go down there,' the Chaplain said with almost reptilian resolve. Gorphon clearly saw the conviction in Murnau's eyes.

'You can't be serious! That would be suicide,' the Death Guard Destroyer protested.

Murnau leant in close. Each of his words was hushed and deliberate.

'No… survivors…'

'But, Brother-Chaplain,' Gorphon began, 'the phosphex–'

'Will test us, yes,' Murnau admitted. 'But no more than Lord Mortarion was tested, advancing undaunted, indomitable, into the mountains of Barbarus. Each step was agony for him, every breath torment, but he did it to set us free. And so we are – free to choose, free to follow. Free to determine our own destiny. All he asks in return is *obedience*. Let us follow in the primarch's footsteps now, undaunted and indomitable.'

Murnau unclasped his skull-helm and fixed the sergeant with his eyes. A

moment of fleeting doubt crossed the sergeant's wretched face before the pair shared a moment of infectious insanity.

The Chaplain would lead them in the primarch's footsteps.

The sergeant nodded.

'Gholic. Hadar-Gul. Take point,' Gorphon ordered. 'We are to finish the survivors.'

As he attached his helmet to his belt, Murnau detected a moment's hesitation in the Destroyers – the first they had demonstrated in the brutal boarding action. The raw-faced Graven knew what their sergeant's orders meant. The Death Guard would have to brave the phosphex themselves and match both their physical resilience and resolve against the Imperial Fists.

Leading the way with their pistols and with idling chainblades held ready, the Destroyers advanced. Grull Gorphon followed with Murnau at his side and Zorrak bringing up the rear. Like Hadar-Gul, he had dropped his cumbersome launcher and had armed himself with bolt pistols instead. The walls and ceiling of the passage had ignited as the phosphorescent fires spread. The chemical blaze danced horribly over the metal, burning with an eerie white-blue flame – it seemed hungry, as though eager to claim new territory. As the squad made its cautious way down the steep corridor, Murnau felt the liquid mist of the toxic compound against his skin. It smothered him like a lingering miasma, and almost immediately he felt the poison seep and scald its way into his flesh.

Murnau could now hear the howling agony of the Imperial Fists rising up from the lower deck. Across his vox-link the Chaplain detected the faintest murmur of agony from the lead Graven as they stomped through the hanging phosphex. The matt ceramite and green trim of their plate visibly smouldered in the glow, but Murnau didn't fully appreciate the torture to which he had exposed them until he too pushed on into the concentrated cloud of chemical death. The glowing flames flaring from the metal of his cables, chest-plate and studded pauldrons was disconcerting enough, but they set light to his long, black hair and licked at his face.

Murnau could feel the desiccating toxic compound eating *into* him.

The Graven held their tongues, biting back the agony as they descended to the gunnery deck. Murnau assumed that the remaining Imperial Fists were suffering as much – if not more so – than the Death Guard, since the Destroyers entered unmolested. Not a single shot was offered in defence.

The gunnery deck was a vision of refulgent, blue hell. There were fires

everywhere. Here the Destroyers found the empty canisters and the chemical cloud in greatest concentration. Murnau heard a low growl across the vox from members of the Graven, but it was the rumble of determination. They were Death Guard – the sons of Mortarion, the scourge of Barbarus. They were much more than their brother Legions. They did not fear death, nor any instrument of death. Brute endurance was their greatest gift, and it was that and that alone that drove the faltering Graven onwards.

'Bodies,' Gorphon announced, rasping through his corrupted lungs.

'Over here, also,' Gholic gargled, as the Destroyers moved out cautiously across the open deck. Imperial Fists, helmetless and face down, their yellow armour burned and twisted. As Murnau and the sergeant stood over the body of one particular dead Space Marine, the Chaplain noticed something out of the corner of one stinging eye.

'Movement!' Hadar-Gul managed in a hoarse roar.

Another of Latham's men stumbled out of the blue murk, his boltgun held slackly in his gauntlet and kicking wild shots into the deck and ceiling. Gorphon spun around, slapping the Imperial Fist back with his power fist. The loyalist fell, his ghoulish face a steaming mask of eaten muscle – there was no skin to speak of, and his cheekbones were visible through the hyper-desiccated flesh. The Destroyer sergeant brought his crackling fist around and took the melting head from the shoulders of the unfortunate warrior. The Imperial Fist fell to his knees before toppling to one side.

'Blood!' Zorrak called out, drawing Murnau and the remaining Graven towards him.

Following spots and spatters of gore that sizzled on the deck amongst the phosphex residue, the Destroyer led them through the blue haze. The spots became clots, and the clots became bloody boot prints until finally a smear on the deck led the Death Guard to a single Space Marine crawling arm over ceramite arm across the gunnery deck. Zorrak raised his bolt pistol.

'Hold!' Murnau barked through his scorched lips. The prone warrior was certainly not an Imperial Fist, as the plain colour of his plate confirmed. His armour could almost be taken for that of the Death Guard. Murnau squinted with his raw eyes. Even through the flickering phosphorescence dancing across the plate it was clear that the suit bore no marking, Legion symbol or rank insignia.

'Who is he?' Gorphon managed, expecting the Chaplain to know.

Murnau didn't, but he felt sure that this was the precious cargo that the *Xanthus* was transporting to Terra. The passenger was a Space Marine, true, but a

legionary no more.

'He is a loyalist spy,' the Chaplain announced. 'Some agent of the Emperor.'

The Chaplain stepped in front of the crawling Space Marine, who looked up at him from the deck. His eyes were misted and blood-speckled, and his face flesh ruptured and wasting away before the Chaplain's gaze. His russet hair and beard were plaited and his chin whiskers rich with the clotted gore he'd brought up from his disintegrating lungs. As he stared up at Murnau he showed the blood-stained serration of sharpened teeth. His voice – when it graced the seething silence – was raw, but full of primal determination.

'This… is Varskjøld,' the agent wheezed. 'Sergeant… do it now…'

It took a moment for Murnau to realise that the agent was talking into his vox-link.

A sudden detonation rocked the gunnery deck as one of the battery plasma cannons was overloaded. It flashed with the heat and light of a miniature sun.

Murnau felt the entire vessel shift. He was blown into a bulkhead wall, and a series of quakes shuddered violently through the superstructure. The agent Varskjøld had instructed some unseen ally to blow the cannon and deliberately hull the derelict, and Murnau could feel the *Xanthus* lurching as a cascade of swamp filth flooded the gunnery deck. Something inside the vessel had equalised – a tipping point had been reached and the extra weight of the diseased waters was taking the shattered section down into the depths.

Moments passed in a blur. Murnau heard the single crash of a bolt pistol. The phosphex obscured everything in a bank of blue, luminescent lethality, and under its cover Gorphon had been shot in the throat. From the angle, the bolt taking the Destroyer sergeant under the chin and blowing out the top of his scabby crown, Murnau reckoned that Varskjøld had taken the shot with a concealed weapon. The Chaplain's response was immediate and well-practised, the crozius coming down on the agent's head with terrible force, splitting open his skull and allowing his brains to spill out through the tangle of his russet plaits.

The sinking ship lurched again, hurling the remaining Graven to the deck once more. Beyond, Murnau could hear the churn of filth bubbling up beyond the flooded sections. Foetid air howled past the skinned flesh of his ears, though doing little to dislodge the cruel hold the phosphex had on the deck. About him, the Chaplain heard the tortured groans of the *Xanthus* being rushed to a quagmire grave.

Almost blind and still suffering under the cruel and caustic attentions of the phosphex haze, the Death Guard were struggling. With the deck shifting beneath

them, it was little wonder that the roaring black waters took them so easily.

Murnau half stumbled, half clawed his way up the incline and hooked his gauntlet into the piping running along the gunnery deck bulkhead. Gholic and Hadar-Gul disappeared into the darkness without a word as the deluge of rotting sludge swept them away.

The ship was moving. What had once been an incline was becoming a floundering vertical. Zorrak's thundering footsteps took him towards the Chaplain, and the two Death Guard reached out their gauntlets for one another, but their ceramite fingertips missed by a whisper and the Destroyer plummeted down into the furious churn of the rising floodwaters.

Using his crozius like a climbing pick, Murnau ascended the wall like the face of a cliff. Hammering into the metal sheeting, he created purchase points to haul himself up while his gauntlet and mag-locking boots had to contend with the busy piping and cables running down the corridor's length. All the while, the lingering cloud of phosphex ate away at both the Chaplain's flesh and his resolve – every inch of exposed skin felt as if it was on fire.

With the swirling filth gargling and spitting its sticky way up towards him, Murnau heaved himself up into the buckled stairwell, but a waterfall of canker-curdled muck began to dribble, stream and then course down from above. Murnau held his position for a moment. The *Xanthus* was sinking, and as it did so the morass surrounding it was flooding in through the rents and breaches in the crashed vessel's hull. The frigate was being flooded from above and below, cutting off the Chaplain's escape and trapping him in the stairwell.

Murnau slammed his fist into the passage wall, putting a dent in the metal. His gaunt face was screwed up with rage, the raw muscles and tendons creating a mask of frustration. He settled himself amongst the stairwell structure, watching the liquid filth cascade past him and gush into the stinking waters below. The Chaplain thought on the living bounty that had withered and died to create such ruination and putridity. He considered the promise of new life that the rotting slime held for the insects, parasites and fungal forms that had colonised, and come to dominate, the sludge-ball that Algonquis had so quickly become. The notion that he was going to become part of that fruitful corruption momentarily amused the Chaplain. He would have smiled but for the fact there was so little of his face left.

The stabbing pain in his eyes flickered away to darkness and all Murnau had left was the fire in his scalded, bloody lungs and the doom in his hearts. His mirth and madness had abandoned him. He licked his perfect teeth. Even with a

blistered tongue he could taste the heavy metal lethality seeping into his body.

In the empty blackness, the Chaplain's thoughts returned to the tale of Mortarion's ascension that he had told the Destroyers to inspire them, and fortify their spirit. To his surprise and disappointment, he found precious little of inspiration in the story now. Picturing Mortarion on the toxic slopes of Barbarus served only to remind him that the poisoned environs of their home world had actually defeated the primarch, and it had been down to the Emperor to save his fallen son.

There would be no one to save Morgax Murnau. The Chaplain remembered Phorgal's insistence that there should be no survivors aboard the *Xanthus*.

Indeed, there would be none.

GREY ANGEL

John French

The prisoner looked up as the cell door opened. Chains as thick as a man's wrist held him against the bare stone wall, looping over him like rust-scaled serpents. They had deactivated his power armour, its dead bulk holding his body like a manacle.

The small cell was carved from black rock, and the walls glistened with damp as a figure stepped through the door carrying a torch. The flame caught the prisoner's eyes, kindling sparks in their depths as they watched the torchbearer.

Shadow-grey robes swathed him, and the prisoner could see a hint of a smiling mouth hidden within a cowl. The iron door shut and locked behind the figure. The cell was suddenly silent but for the hissing of the torch.

'So you are the one they caught,' the figure said at length. 'I am here to question you. You understand this much, I am sure.'

'Do what you must. I do not fear your methods.'

'I am here to find answers, not cut you to pieces.'

As the figure stepped forwards the prisoner saw two liquid-black eyes glitter within the cowl. The figure was a head shorter than a Space Marine, though bulked by armour and robe.

The prisoner blinked. His vision was sharp, but it was as if his mind could not focus, as if something about the figure could not be resolved. The figure glanced into the shadowed corner of the cell as though he were waiting for something. 'What line of simple questioning requires that you chain me here?'

'Questions of loyalty.' The robed figure held the torch closer, letting its flickering light reach across the dull grey surface of the prisoner's armour. 'You wear the battleplate of the Legions, but bear no heraldry or marks of fealty. To

whom we bend our knee defines who we are. This is the order of things. You are undefined, your loyalty unknown, and you have strayed into my realm. At best you are a mystery. At worst…'

'Is this an interrogation or a sermon?' the prisoner demanded.

'Does it have to be either? An interrogation would imply that we are enemies, and I would not want to believe that. A sermon would mean that I was trying to persuade you, and I have no need to do that. I am simply telling you what I know to be true.'

'These chains say otherwise.'

'Once, upon this world, it was *death* to come unheralded into another's domain. Be thankful that I have allowed you to keep your armour.' The robed figure placed the torch in a metal bracket, his armoured hands glossy black and fire-touched gold. The oily light pushed back the gloom at the edge of the cell and the prisoner could see his bolter and chainsword propped against the wall. 'The chains are simply a precaution. I have accorded you every honour, though you have not extended the meanest courtesy in return. You have not even told me your name.'

The prisoner leaned his head back, feeling the cool damp of the stone wall upon his scalp. 'My name is Cerberus.'

'Ah, a legend of the ancient times. As you choose. I will return the honour. My name is Luther, and I would know why you have come to my realm.'

Iacton Qruze folded into the shadow beyond the wall and listened. His armour was ghost-grey against the night, and the only mark it bore was lost in the gloom and rain spatter. He had removed his helmet, letting his senses sift the night air. He could smell the gathering charge of thunder.

Above him the fortress of Aldurukh rose in tiers of cold stone to a starless night sky. He had penetrated its outer defences, but he knew that there were guards, sensors and security precautions that would only increase the deeper he went. He was taking a risk, but time and the possibility of total failure had forced his hand.

Necessity: his watchword for all these last years, as bitter and undeniable as ever. He had been on Caliban for days, moving in the darkness – listening, watching, trying to find what they needed, what they had come for.

The Lion had sent part of the Dark Angels Legion back to its home world under the command of Luther. That had been long before Horus had begun his rebellion, but Caliban had been eerily silent ever since. In a war of betrayal and treachery, that silence could mean nothing, or many things. It was a matter they

had come here to resolve, but they were running out of time.

The Dark Angels had captured Loken. *No*, he thought, Loken had *allowed them* to take him. Qruze could see only folly in such an action – it was a dangerous gamble. He had waited for as long as he could, to see if Loken would get himself free, or if his plan had actually worked. If Loken had met with Luther and determined his loyalty, then they could deliver their message and move into the open. But there had been no sign, and too much time had passed. Now Qruze had to gamble even more.

Nothing was moving in the courtyard below – he could hear only the wind and the patter of rain on stone. He shifted forwards, his armoured bulk moving with a quietened purr. The battleplate was that worn by all of the Legiones Astartes, but a keen eye would have picked out the differences, the mark of unique artifice in its grey simplicity.

Qruze moved to the parapet edge, staying low. He cocked his head, feeling the rain run down the valleys of his scarred cheeks.

The lightning lit the sky and roared its anger over the fortress. Qruze dropped over the parapet, the sound of his impact on the stone below swallowed by the thunder's echo. He glanced around, his hand on the boltgun mag-locked to his leg plate.

Nothing.

He moved around the edge of a courtyard, keeping to the rain-soaked shadows. The oily light of a torch flickered from an open archway that led into the fortress' interior. He was three paces from the door when he heard the footsteps. He went still, hand hovering over his bolter.

A figure emerged from the doorway, the torchlight rendering it as a writhing silhouette. Qruze could see the bulk of pauldrons swathed under a fur-trimmed robe that rippled in the wind. Short wings sprang from the temples of the warrior's blunt-faced helm, and a drawn sword rested against his right shoulder. Rain ran down the flat of the blade. In the torchlight it looked like runnels of cooling fire.

Qruze held his breath, felt the rising beat of his hearts. The Dark Angel tilted his head, red eye-lenses fixed upon the sky.

Lightning bleached out the courtyard and the robed Dark Angel. Qruze could feel the rising crest of adrenaline, cold and oily, inside his old muscles. He forced his heartbeats to slow. Inside his gauntlets his fingers were almost trembling.

The Dark Angel dropped his gaze, half turned and scanned the courtyard

opposite where Qruze stood. He would have to shoot if the Dark Angel turned around. It would have to be a kill-shot, clean and fast, very precise – a single Stalker round in the instant the sentry drew his bolter.

Qruze's mind ran through the movement, focusing on the target, the timing, readying himself for the inevitable moment.

He could see the rain beading on the pale fur draped across the Dark Angel's shoulders. Qruze had not come here to kill, but he would do so if needed. That it was a fellow Space Marine, whose loyalty might yet be true, did not alter that necessity. In the war they now fought, such things meant nothing.

He visualised the mercury-filled shell punching through the warrior's eyepiece. He tensed his legs – he would need to spring forwards as soon as he fired, to catch the body before it clattered to the floor…

The Dark Angel turned, and walked back through the doorway. Qruze listened to the footsteps recede. He exhaled slowly, and let his muscles relax.

He saw the glint of the blade just an instant before the power field was activated. The static edge of the tip brushed his temple, and went still.

'Do not move.'

The electric wasp buzz of the blade filled Qruze's ear. He could half see someone at his left shoulder, sharp features and a grim mouth framed by the shadow of a deep hood. He had been discovered, and that meant that all aspects of the mission were compromised.

Truth and loyalty now meant nothing. He would *have* to kill, but given the skill implied by how completely his enemy had surprised him, that would be no easy task. Qruze swallowed. He needed to wait for the powerblade to move.

'You may speak,' the blade-wielder went on, 'but if you move in any other way you will die.'

'I understand.'

'Good. Now tell me why you are here, Iacton Qruze.'

'They are not coming for you,' Luther assured him.

Loken was silent. He had come here to find an answer to a simple question: where did the Dark Angels of Caliban stand? For the Emperor, or with Horus? Rogal Dorn himself had demanded the answer and, with his brother Iacton Qruze, Loken had come to find it.

But the answer was not simple. His near-death on the murdered planet of Isstvan III had given him a hunter's instinct for the vile scent of the warp's corrupting influence, but in facing Luther he could feel the shift of immaterial

energies. The coiling touch of temptation.

He was no psyker, but at that moment he felt that somehow he perceived something beyond mortal senses, as if scent and sight stretched into another realm altogether.

Luther's eyes were fixed upon him, unblinking. Loken shook his head, and gazed into the shadows in the corner of the cell. The sensation was insubstantial, but Loken could feel it in every word Luther uttered, tasting the secrecy and the shadows of choices already long made. He could feel it in the fact of his own captivity in the dungeons of the Dark Angels.

'I am here alone.'

Luther smiled as if at a subtle joke. He stepped closer, slipped the cowl from his head. His face was strong but without the blunt brutality of most Space Marines – he was human still, at least in part. There was an openness to his features, an air of supreme confidence bound to intellect. It was the face of trust and brotherhood, the face of someone you could believe in and follow to the last.

Loken had heard of Luther's quality as a leader. He had seen something of it long ago, but as he looked back at the Dark Angel he realised that the reputation missed the essence of the man. He was a fulcrum around which conquests and loyalties turned. Such power had unified Terra and created the Imperium, and then that same power had turned it upon its head.

Looking into Luther's dark eyes, Loken realised that he had known such a quality before. For an eye-blink instant he felt he was looking at Horus himself – Horus from a more noble time.

Luther turned away, and walked to a low block of mould-covered stone at the foot of the wall. He sat, his eyes gazing into some imagined distance. Loken watched him, though in his head he flicked between strategies. Questions and possibilities.

He had taken a risk in letting himself be taken. He might have been killed out of hand, but it had been the only way for this meeting, this *test* to take place. Now Loken had to make a choice that he had not anticipated.

'Do you dream, Cerberus?' Luther asked, his voice tinged with melancholy.

'I dream.'

'Of what?'

'I dream… of my brothers.'

'Who are they? The brothers in your dreams, who are they?'

Loken gritted his teeth. 'The dead.'

'Ah. I cannot dream. Ever since the Imperium changed me I have not dreamed.

I can remember it, though. What it was like, and so forth.' Luther nodded and Loken felt a jolt of surprise; there was understanding in Luther's eyes, understanding and pity. 'This is not the first time you have been left to fate. I can see it in your manner.'

Loken felt as though Luther's words had peeled back a scab formed over the past, as if the torment he had suffered were merely a specimen pinned out under Luther's calm gaze.

He remembered the sky falling and him falling with it. He remembered the face of Tarik, grinning for the last time, and the wind of Isstvan carrying the stink of a murdered brotherhood.

Horus had betrayed him, had tried to kill him and then left him on a dead world.

'It takes something from you doesn't it?' Luther murmured. 'Being deserted hollows you out, and leaves a void inside. People might say that it hurts, that the psyche aches from the wound.'

Loken tried to bring his attention back to the present, but could not. *They had left him, to the ashes and the tainted ruins! They had left him amongst the dead, amongst the cursed dwellers of the netherworld! He had only been called back to fight in a war of revenge and broken futures…*

Luther went on. 'It's not true though. Abandonment does not leave pain. You wish it did because that would be better than the truth. It leaves nothing. Not hope, not pain, not forgiveness.'

Loken was silent. He could feel his muscles bunched inside his armour, his skin prickled with sweat as his hearts surged stimulant-laden blood through him. He let out a breath and stilled his body to calm. Luther watched him closely.

After a long pause, he frowned and stood. He pulled the torch from the iron bracket and came to stand so that he was no more than an arm's reach away. He raised the torch, and the heat prickled Loken's bare features. 'There is something about your face… I am sure we have met before.'

Luther tilted his head and took a step back.

'On Cardensine perhaps? Now *that* was a battle. The warriors of seven Legions in the field, enemies so thick they mashed the dead to pulp under their feet. Or Zaramund? Yes, perhaps it was there. We fought alongside the Luna Wolves there. Brave warriors, swift as a lance strike, and as hard as the rock of Cthonia. Yes, perhaps it was there.'

Loken looked back at Luther, his face revealing nothing. Inside him, memories spun – Cardensine, the Lion raising his sword to the sky as battle-fire burned its night away. Zaramund, where Loken had stood among the ranks and watched

Luther follow Abaddon over the cratered redoubts. It had been no more than a few decades ago.

He felt cold. He should not have come to Caliban. Luther was not a man to be judged at a glance – he was something more important, more pivotal to the course of the war than even Lord Dorn had dared to imagine.

'Do *you* remember the fields of Zaramund?' Luther asked him, pointedly.

'I remember nothing,' Loken snapped.

'There is a brush of Cthonian in your words, "Cerberus", few though they have been.'

Loken looked away. Luther smiled then, his mouth splitting his face with a broad crack of shadow in the torchlight.

'So what led you here, wayward *son of Cthonia?*'

Loken stared, unable to hide his shock. Had they been wrong? Had news of the Warmaster's rebellion already come to Caliban?

'The Legiones Astartes do not fight their own kind,' said Luther, his demeanour becoming more threatening, 'nor come as spies into each other's realms. I have asked you why you came here, and you have said nothing. So now I must wonder who sent you. The Lion, my sworn brother? Does he doubt that I keep to my appointed duty? My unique *honour?*'

For a moment Loken thought that he saw something play across Luther's face, something ugly breaking through the veneer of perfect control. Then Luther shook his head, his eyes straying to the shadows. Loken felt the touch of destiny again in the cramped cell, a hard shape of blade-like angles and raw ambition.

Then it was gone, fading back into dull unresolved sensations.

'No. Not my brother. Not the Lion. But who then, and why? Do you carry a message for me? Is that it?'

They did not know. It was as Loken and Qruze had first surmised, then – Horus' influence had not yet spread as far as the fortress of Aldurukh. That should have made matters easy. Dorn had given them a message to relay to the Dark Angels of Caliban, if they were free of treachery.

Luther stared straight at him. '…or are *you* a message yourself?'

Loken opened his mouth. He felt the words forming upon his tongue – the revelation of Horus' betrayal, the war that divided the Imperium, and the call for the I Legion to reaffirm their loyalty to the Emperor. He could speak that truth, could loose it with but a few words. He felt the temptation of it, the need to resolve the unanswered question.

But darkness and treachery circled the home of the Dark Angels. Loken could

still feel it like a ghost of the winds of Isstvan. He thought of the intelligence and power of Luther, and the suspicion inherent in his questions. Loken had once been a warrior, able to resolve such matters with the simple martial logic of war. Now he served only guesses and half-truths. Could he be sure of the effects his words might ultimately have?

After a long moment, he spoke. 'I am nothing.'

Luther nodded, his eyes like sparkling obsidian in a face of pale marble.

'Very well.' With a swirl of his robes, he walked to the cell door. 'I will return, Cerberus, son of Cthonia. And when I do, I will decide what you are. And if you are a herald of treachery then I will know *who* it is that has turned against me.'

Loken let his eyes close and the darkness became complete. He had to get free. He had made his decision – the message from Rogal Dorn and the revelation of the war had to be protected. The fear that they may have already upset a delicate balance of circumstance itched at the back of his thoughts.

Luther would return with more questions, and perhaps the means to get his answers. The Council of Nikaea had outlawed the use of psykers within the Legions, but he had seen the proof many times over that *necessity* undid edicts.

He opened his eyes. 'Why couldn't he see you?'

'*Because we choose those who see us, and when*.'

The small, hooded figure crouched in the corner of the cell, its shape a fold of deep gloom outlined by a cold halo. It had stood motionless while Luther had questioned Loken, the empty space beneath its cowl taking in all that had transpired. Loken could feel the clammy, static touch of its presence, the witch-touch of its words in his mind. There was something familiar about it that he could not place, like the face of a forgotten friend.

'You touched my mind,' he said. 'I could sense things that do not exist – the darkness and warp-taint, the possibilities, the unspoken secrets behind Luther's words. That was you.'

'*We let you see somewhat as we do. But your senses are limited. Your mind is blind.'*

'What are you?'

'*You have asked us that already*.'

'You did not answer.'

'*We watch*.'

Loken snarled. 'Speak plainly. I do not trust you–'

'*Trust is not required*,' the watcher interrupted him. '*We have allowed you to see what you must, and that is all*.'

‘Is what I sensed real, or merely what you wished me to see? Was it… the *truth?*’

‘*Perhaps*.’

‘Then you will tell me no more?’

‘*No*.’

‘Then why are you still here?’

‘*To set you free*.’

Loken felt a static charge spread through the air. Power flowed through his armour once more, and his own muscles twitched as their movement meshed with the suit’s fibre bundles. An acidic burn ran down his spine as interface plugs fizzed with charge. The chains holding him writhed and snapped, and he fell hard onto the cold flagstones beneath him.

The watcher moved towards the door, its form flickering between positions like an image from a damaged pict-feed. Loken clamped his weapons to his armour. The static in the air discharged sparks across the ceramite plates.

The cell door opened and the watcher flickered across its threshold, the dark space of its hood still facing towards Loken.

‘*Go. You must tell your masters what you have seen here.*’

The corridor was still and silent. The torch flames were a frozen flicker in their iron brackets, the shadows on the floor still. Loken glanced at the Dark Angels flanking the cell door. Each wore pale cloaks over their black armour. Double-handed swords rested point-down at their feet. Ruby eye-lenses stared unseeing as he moved past.

His footsteps scraped on the stone floor. The sound felt alien in his ears, as if he were trespassing into a dream. A dull ache of pounding blood was building in his temples, and the watcher’s final words seemed to be spoken directly into his mind.

‘*You have what time we can give you, Garviel Loken*.’

He moved down the corridor at a run, footfalls echoing in the dead air. The shadows writhed, torchlight moving in jerks like the flicked pages of a book. He turned a corner.

The Dark Angel had been walking the other way, his hand resting on the pommel of a sheathed blade. Their eyes met as Loken turned the corner, his cold grey to the guard’s red helmet lenses.

The warrior’s blade was in his hand, its length hissing with power. Loken was not here to kill. He was a hidden emissary in a fortress of unknown, and perhaps

unresolved, loyalty. His mere presence might have tipped a wavering balance – a *death* in these dark corridors almost certainly would.

Loken's hands were empty as he charged, and still empty as the Dark Angel cut down towards his head. Loken twisted at the last moment and rammed his weight forwards, and his shoulder met the guard's arms at the elbow as the sword fell. The Dark Angel staggered but Loken's hands were already up, gripping his opponent's helm at the faceplate and crown.

The guard fell, and Loken fell with him – they hit the floor with a sound like a hammer shattering marble. The Dark Angel still had the sword in his right hand. Loken saw the blade move, and fastened his grip on his opponent's wrist.

The punch came from nowhere. Loken's teeth jarred and his nose cracked under the warrior's gauntlet. His ears rang. Blood spattered the Dark Angel's white tabard.

He swung his leg up and stamped down on the guard's free arm, pinning it to the ground, then hauled himself upright and rained down blow after blow, hammering the front of the Dark Angel's helm into a crumpled ruin. The red lenses shattered, and dull green eyes glared pure hatred up at him through the fractured sockets.

The guard twisted as Loken drew his hand back to strike again, and suddenly he was on his side, right arm trapped beneath his own armoured flank. The Dark Angel leapt to his feet, sword free and rising.

'*Hold!*'

The guard's head twitched around at the sound of the voice. It was enough – Loken surged to his feet, grappling the Dark Angel's sword arm as he rammed him into the stone wall. The guard's head lolled under the barrage of blows, his weapon clattering to the ground.

Loken could hear his own breath heaving from his lungs. Blood framed the green eyes inside the shattered helm.

The Dark Angel shoved him back, his strength seemingly undimmed even after being knocked senseless. He made to lunge for the sword on the floor.

The shot struck the guard in the left eye, and blew out his skull inside the ruin of his helm in a spray of blood and bone fragments. Loken felt the Dark Angel's battleplate become dead weight in his hands. He knew the sound of a Stalker-pattern bolt-shell, the hissing gasp of its flight and the wet impact of its mercury-filled head. He did not need to look around to know who had killed his opponent.

'What have you done?' he cried, carefully lowering the body to the floor.

Iacton Qruze shrugged, striding towards him. ‘It was a necessity, lad.’

‘We could have subdued him! He did not need to die. You may have executed a loyal warrior of the Imperium.’

‘He would not be the first, nor do I think the last…’

‘This may have consequences we wanted to avoid,’ Loken sighed. ‘There are unresolved loyalties at play, and you have just tipped the balance against us!’

‘Possibly. But matters have moved beyond our original concerns.’

Loken took a moment to compose himself. He snorted a messy blood clot onto the flagstones, and adjusted the shattered bones of his nose. ‘I do not believe Luther knows of the war… but the seed of corruption is already here. Our message may have prevented it taking root. But we cannot relay that message now.’

‘You are correct,’ Qruze replied, ‘but our mission has yielded something of great worth, and to protect that interest this warrior needed to die.’

Loken frowned. ‘Why, what did you find?’

‘Me, Garviel. He found *me*.’

A Dark Angel stepped out from the shadows behind Qruze as though solidifying from the darkness itself. Loken felt a shock run up his spine. A skeletal angel spread its bony wings across the breastplate of the warrior’s void-black armour. Rain had soaked his split robe, and drops shook from the hem as the figure stepped forwards.

He moved with a relaxed precision that Loken knew could become a killing movement without a flicker of warning. The face within the rain-soaked hood was as hard and humourless as it had always been.

‘It has been a long time, has it not?’

Loken turned to Qruze, anger running across his scarred face. ‘What have you told him?’

‘We have reached an understanding.’

Loken met the eyes within the cowl.

‘Iacton is right,’ the Angel said. ‘Matters here are more complex than you can imagine. Ignorance is a shield. I fear that the truth you bear would not have an effect that would serve the Imperium, nor my Legion.’

Loken watched as the robed figure knelt by the corpse at their feet. He lifted the power sword and placed it in the fallen angel’s dead grip.

‘I will see you safely out of Aldurukh,’ he assured them.

‘Oh? And what will you do after we are gone?’

‘Watch and guard, in silence. Such has been my duty for a *long* time, and the

duty of those who came before me.'

The robed figure stood and strode away down the passage. Loken and Qruze followed, first walking and then at a run. Behind them, echoing cries of alarm chased the sound of their footsteps.

He called back to them. 'Tread carefully, brothers…'

They sprinted along rough-hewn tunnels that plunged through the bedrock, passing through iron doors and over bridges spanning great, natural chasms. Sometimes they heard the sounds of pursuit, but the robed figure led them on into the darkness, and never once did they catch sight of their hunters.

Above them, the storm raged. At the base of an open cliff face beneath the night sky, Loken looked out at the now sparse forests of Caliban swaying in the rain and wind amongst the industrial smokestacks.

Panting beside him, Qruze turned to the robed figure and brought a fist to his chest in the old salute of Unity. 'Your service… will be remembered… kinsman. No matter what happens… this will not be forgotten.'

'Remembrance does not concern me. All of us that serve in the shadows are the *unremembered*. No, tonight I have in fact lost something. You have taken it from me, and I will never be able to reclaim it.'

Loken eyed their ally, the only person on Caliban who knew the truth of what had become of the Imperium. 'And what is it that you have lost?'

The figure turned without answer and walked back towards the hidden doorway into the bowels of the Rock. Loken looked questioningly at Qruze, but the old warrior watched the robed figure as he vanished into the night.

'Forgiveness, lad… He has lost the chance for forgiveness.'

LOST SONS

James Swallow

I commit these words to vox-thief.

Know that it is day one hundred and eleven of the fifth year of our vigil, and the third year since the reckoning of the betrayal. My temper grows no longer, my blade's edge ever more wicked as I sharpen it and wait.

And I wait.

I am Arkad, Warden of the Blood Angels and for now, as I have been since the order was spoken by my Lord Sanguinius, I am custodian of Baal and all her environs.

We are twenty in number, my brothers and I. A handful of sons from our Legion's great sum, here upon the rusty sands of our home world. We march the halls of the fortress-monastery and we drill endlessly. We spar against one another and the combat-slaves. We meditate and supervise the army of human serfs who keep the hearth of the Legion burning, the glories of the Blood Angels polished and perfect and always ready.

But we wait.

Five years is not the blink of an eye in cosmic time, it is barely within the notice of a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. We live on scales that common men do not comprehend. Campaigns that span decades are the meat and drink of our lives.

Five years? I have slumbered longer in stasis-sleep. It means nothing!

It means…

Time is a strange, malleable thing. I have known an age to pass between the draw and exhale of my breath, but these years have moved as if every day grows longer than the last. I rise before the dawn of Baal's red sun each morning and it

seems an eternity elapses before it drops back below the horizon.

Inaction chafes at me, and the others. We do nothing. We occupy ourselves with trivia and training and accomplish no advance! All this occurs while out in the galaxy a war unlike any other burns stars to ash. A civil war, a nightmare of Legion against Legion. A conflict that… *and I whisper it*… may have taken the greatest toll upon us.

I hope that this day will be the last. That today the order I swore to obey will be lifted from my shoulders.

Imperial Memoranda # GHJRHVE/334/DXGJ/7316/Theta

+++DATUM BEGINS+++

Let it be known that by the order of Horus Lupercal, Warmaster, First Among Equals (other titles omitted) it has been commanded that The Angel Sanguinius, Primarch of the IX Legiones Astartes, Lord of Baal (other titles omitted) is to gather the Great Companies of the Three Hundred, the entirety of the Blood Angels Legion [refer to: addendum] *and carry the battle standard of the Emperor of Mankind to the worlds of the Signus Cluster. Lord Sanguinius will bring the Imperium's displeasure and its illumination to the errant and the lost under the yoke of the alien race known as the* nephilim [refer to: Melchior pacification, extermination pogroms of the White Scars], *until the extermination of the xenos.*

This will be done, in Terra's name.

+ADDENDUM+

To maintain operational parity in the Baal system and the Legion structure, a token force will remain in situ. Minimum recommendation requires six capital ships and attendant supplement vessels, servile crew thereof, and no less than twenty Space Marines.

+++DATUM ENDS+++

I climb to the black basalt landing pad in the eastern donjon, and Brother Hezen is there waiting for me. He looks out over the roof of the Grand Annex, the towers and domes of the fortress-monastery.

Hezen doesn't turn, even though I know he hears my approach. There is little sound up here beyond the low keen of the razorwinds. It seems unnatural for our citadel to be so quiet. As I walked here along the arcades, I heard only my own footfalls. Hezen is the first Blood Angel I have seen today, the bright crimson of his wargear polished to a lustre that glimmers in the noonday light.

He still does not turn to me.

My armour, ebon black as the Warden's office decrees, is as fine and

undamaged as his. Cleaned and polished each night, even though the need may not be present. At my hip hangs the bone-white winged skull device of my crozius arcanum, the signifier of my rank and status. I have to think for a moment to recall the last time I activated the weapon's destructive power-aura; for now it remains inert and forever ready, as do we.

'Hezen.' I call his name and at last my old friend graces me with a look. He has his helm tucked under one arm and the wiry silver threads of his hair are caught in the breeze. A line of service studs forms an accent over his right eye, giving him a permanently quizzical expression.

'Brother Arkad.' He bows slightly. 'Word comes from the orbitals.' He taps his vox-bead. 'A small craft has left the target and broken atmosphere in the last few minutes. Landing permission was granted.'

'What about the starship?' The vessel, a Dauntless-class light cruiser, had first been met by picket patrols beyond the orbit of Ammonai, the most distant outpost of the system.

'Under the guns of a dozen battlecraft,' says Hezen. 'If it so much as lights a plasma torch without permission, they'll open fire.'

I consider that appropriate. Communication has been terse; the shipmaster spoke only to inform us that he was delivering a messenger bearing the authority of the Regent of Terra. The pennants and codes are all present and correct, so I am left with little choice but to agree.

But these are times when trust is no longer in abundance, and I have made certain that every tower within line of sight contains a warrior armed with a Stalker-pattern boltgun. We have all heard the stories of the treachery at Isstvan, Calth and elsewhere, when battle-brothers who supposedly came in good faith were shown to be disloyal, murdering out of hand those who welcomed them. *It will not happen here.* I have made that a vow.

I hear the distant noise of thrusters and I remove my own headgear with a snap of connectors. The skull-faced helm locks to my thigh plate and I turn my eyes to the clouded sky. Some say I have the aspect of an unfinished man; I am hairless, the after-effect of poisons that almost killed me on Vaddox Prime. I wear my disfigurement proudly, it must be said. If a man will not return my gaze at first meeting, I think I will never truly trust him.

Now a drop-ship, incoming. I see it to the west, moving fast. Grey like slate, and even my genhanced sight cannot pick out any identifying insignia. My hand drops to the hilt of my crozius.

Hezen sees it too. He rests his grip on the bolt pistol holstered on his belt. We

are both ready to kill or be killed today. And I think it is true to say we both secretly wish for an excuse for battle.

It is a Storm Eagle. It makes one pass over the pad and lands in a skirl of thruster exhaust. The drop-ramp opens before the dust has settled, and a figure is silhouetted in the hatchway.

A Space Marine; he can be nothing else, the bulk of power armour filling the interior of the transport ship. But what colours does this so-called messenger wear? I do not know at first sight.

I remember another messenger, five years ago. The moment is clear and crisp in my thoughts, my eidetic memory bringing it to life as if it is happening now.

I was on the Heartcease*, the battleship. The vessel is an old friend. I was aboard it when the Emperor came to Baal for the first time, and I was young, so very young. We became whole when Sanguinius rejoined us.*

But in this memory, the Great Angel was not with us.

The bulk of the Legion's fleet had been deployed across the galaxy, much of it to the Kayvas Belt for the past year, but now that mission was over and the Blood Angels prepared for a new endeavour. We were to go to Signus Prime on the orders of the Warmaster, and punish the xenos who sought to impose their will upon it. In an unprecedented move, the astropathic signals told of the intent to take the whole Legion to those blighted stars.

I admit I was taken with the ideal. All of us, the grand army of the crimson, the Angels of Death turned to one singular purpose. Oh, I wanted so much to be a part of that campaign. Such glory would be found in it.

But it was not to be.

The orders came from the Primarch. He would not allow another to give them, for he knew full well how we would feel when we took up the duty. I heard the echo of his voice in the repetition of the astropath Ser Jesper, the Master of Speakers, as he relayed the command.

Stand down.

I actually flinched.

Jesper spoke twenty names, and I distinctly remember the flashes of regret on the faces of the men who were not *chosen. Regret for us. As they left for the assemblage, they bade us farewell with rueful smiles. They felt sorry for us, but they were glad they were not us.*

A great and singular mission was now ours in their stead; we were to stand sentinel over the Baal system and the home of our Legion, protect and nurture it

while the remainder of our kinsmen fought the alien. We were to be guards, then. Caretakers entrusted with the security of our home world, but not warriors free to take to battle.

It was a bittersweet thing. On the one hand, a high honour that we twenty were trusted with the beating heart of the Blood Angels; on the other, a great tragedy that we would not taste victory in the assemblage of our Legion at Signus.

I accepted it, with the humility and stoic mien that was expected of a Warden. But not all followed my example.

The messenger wears no Legion sigil, no rank insignia. His armour is featureless, except for a small icon etched high upon one shoulder. But none of that shocks me more than the fact that he openly wears a librarian's psychic hood, in direct contravention of the Decree of Nikaea! The Legiones Astartes are forsworn from the use of psionic powers, and yet this one shows the tools of the psyker without fear of censure.

Before he can set foot on Baal, I am at the base of the ramp, denying him egress. Hezen is behind me, his pistol drawn.

The psyker eyes me with something that might be grim amusement. I see him better now, a shorn scalp and a stubbled face, eyes that are watchful, a nose broken by countless blows. He knows the question I am going to ask before I speak it, not through use of his powers, but because he has heard it a hundred times before. 'I am Brother Tylos Rubio, agent of Malcador the Sigillite. I carry his authority and that of the Emperor.'

The rest is unspoken; the Sigillite's word is permission enough for anything, so it would seem.

After a moment, I step back and allow him to disembark. 'I would know your rank and Legion, brother.'

Rubio's expression is neutral. 'I have neither, as you would reckon it. I exist here as a tool for the will of the Regent.'

'And what does Lord Malcador want with us?' Hezen asks. 'I hear a civil war is going on out there.' My battle-brother makes no attempt to mask his bitterness.

'Aye,' Rubio nods. 'And now that war has come to Baal.'

'We see no traitor ships.' My hand is on the crozius. I am willing the opportunity to draw it. 'Horus Lupercal, may death blight him, has not yet seen fit to test our defences.'

'But you know of the tumult in the immaterium?' Rubio presses me with the question. 'The great swathe of warp-tempest that men are calling the *ruinstorm*?'

‘I know.’

How can one not? Several of Ser Jesper’s astropaths have perished in the wake of the massive metapsychic effect. We have heard the reports, sporadic and conflicting, of a huge maelstrom of nigh-impenetrable space storms cutting across the galaxy. Some say it is an engineered thing, made by the turncoat Warmaster and his traitor allies, others that the Emperor caused it as a firebreak to blockade Terra. Whatever the cause, while it churns and boils through the void, the skies are cut in two.

I know the ruinstorm. It hangs like a bloody curtain between Baal and the far stars where our kindred have gone. It is the barrier we would need to penetrate to peer towards the Signus Cluster. It is what denies us word of our Legion and our primarch.

‘Then you know that the map of the galaxy has changed.’ Rubio reaches into a pack hanging from his belt. ‘Perhaps forever. That change has forced Lord Malcador to make hard choices for the good of the Imperium. For the future of mankind.’

He is holding a matt-black tube in his hand, the case for a message scroll of photic parchment. The black scroll is a document of such rare import that it is more legend than eventuality. I see it and at first I do not understand.

Twice before in living memory such messages were delivered to the home world of a Legiones Astartes. I reach out and take it, because I know I must. I am Arkad, Warden of the Blood Angels, guardian of Baal, and only I can do so.

The tube breaks open with a twist and the parchment unfurls in my hands. The ceramite digits of my gauntlets hide the tremor in my fingers.

‘I am sorry, brother.’ I hear Rubio talking, but the words are distant. My every iota of being is trapped by the writing on the scroll. Silver, on black.

‘The Blood Angels are no more.’ I speak, although the voice is disconnected from me. The words it utters are not what scream through my thoughts, the denials and the howling defiance. ‘Our Legion… has been declared null.’

Hezen rounds on the grey-armoured warrior, his gun rising as high as his fury. ‘What lies are these?’ he shouts, taking aim at Rubio. ‘You cannot say such a thing, you have no right to issue that diktat! This is madness!’

‘It is the Regent’s command,’ replies the psyker, and not without compassion. ‘I regret to say that if you disobey, you will be considered *excommunicatus traitoris*.’

I hold the scroll numbly in my hands, and I remember speaking those same words.

Only months had passed since the fleet was dispatched to Signus. But so much had changed.

The stinging buzz of the teleportarium effect briefly overwhelmed my senses, and abruptly I was no longer in the transit chamber of the citadel, but there in the middle of the tacticarium aboard the Heartcease.

I drew my crozius but did not ignite its power field. I hoped that the sight of the weapon might be enough.

Nagal and the others turned to face me as I stalked across the compartment. Crewmen scattered out of my way. Nagal and five brethren, each of them clad in full battle regalia, bolters loaded and ready.

Ready to go to war.

'You should not have come, Warden!' Nagal fumed. He had his boltgun in his grip, but he did not quite point it at me.

'Stand down.' I gave the command, and it was only after the words left my mouth that I heard Sanguinius' echo in them.

Nagal gave a bitter laugh. 'Not this time. We are going, and you will not stop us.' He gestured around. The command crew of the Heartcease *were at combat stations, prepared to take the ship out and into the warp. The fools; the storm would kill them if they attempted to cross it. I told him this, but Nagal was not swayed. 'We'll take that risk. It is better to perish in the attempt than remain here and allow our will to corrode.'*

'Brother, heed me. Stop now. It is the primarch's will. If you disobey, you will be considered excommunicatus traitoris.'

That gave them all a moment of honest pause, but Nagal rode over it. 'I seek no violence, Arkad. Just turn your back and let us leave. It is for the best.'

'I will not.' A part of me wanted to go with him. 'I share your anguish, your frustration. We all do!' I scanned the faces of the other warriors, and the crewmen. Yes, we all felt it. 'But we have our orders. We must remain here and protect Baal until we are relieved.'

'Protect it from what*?' The question exploded from Nagal in a snarl. 'We cannot delay!'*

He stabbed a finger at the viewport and the stars beyond, taking in the blackness, and I knew what he meant. Out there, hidden in the marrow of warp space, a hellish fault was growing like a cancer. The spacers were calling it the ruinstorm. It thickened with each passing day, and with its arrival we had lost contact with the Legion fleet and the Angel. A dark pall fell over all of us. I feared the worst.

I said the name. 'Horus. We must stand ready to oppose him–'

Nagal wouldn't let me finish. He spat on the deck. 'Lies and idiocy! I refuse to accept these stories denigrating our lord's beloved brother! Horus would never turn his face from Terra! This is all a plan to divide us, engineered by some unseen enemy! That is why we must go to the Angel's side, to learn the truth.' He stopped, losing his momentum, the terrible possibility of it weighing him down. I knew that feeling, oh yes. 'And if... if by some horror it is *true... then all the more reason to find Sanguinius.'*

'If Horus is a traitor,' said one of the other warriors, 'we'll find him and kill him.'

My battle-brother rounded on me, his eyes alight with dread. 'What purpose is there to hide here if our father is lost, if he is…' Nagal could not bring himself to say the words.

If Sanguinius has been killed?

I took my crozius and returned it to its scabbard. I approached Nagal and met his gaze. 'Do you think the Angel is dead?' I asked it of all of them, and none could reply. 'Answer me, kinsmen. If you truly believe that Sanguinius is lost to us, then I will let you take this ship and go.'

The silence that followed seemed to endure forever.

'No,' said Nagal, at long last. 'I do not believe he is dead. We would know.' He tapped his chest-plate, over his primary heart. 'Here.'

Nagal glares at me, and he hates me. He hates me for making him stand down, and he hates me for the news I have brought before the twenty of us. I am the focus of all his rage and frustration. I cannot blame him.

The black scroll is in his hand, and he crushes it in his grip before angrily dashing it to the floor of the Grand Annex. The massive domed chamber, built to house conclaves of Blood Angels a hundred times the size of our gathering, resonates with the sound of our voices. 'This is unacceptable!'

The others are in agreement. They have listened to me repeat Brother Rubio's words and they rebel against them. The psyker stands outside the great hall, waiting for our word, but I have no doubt his preternatural gifts let him hear everything that transpires within.

'What proof does the Sigillite have?' asks another legionary. Like all of us, he does not want to accept the possibility that we are now all that remains of the Sons of Sanguinius. 'The word of fools and humans?'

And yet, I have seen the datum Rubio brought with him. Observations from

Imperial warships, reinforcement vessels sent from Terra at the outbreak of the rebellion. A handful of wrecks have clawed their way back through the madness of the ruinstorm, a handful out of hundreds.

The crews of these ships turned their sensors towards the Signus Cluster as they crossed the light years towards it, their scry-scopes probing for any contact from the Blood Angels flotilla, their astropaths calling out for their like aboard the flagship *Red Tear* and its sister vessels.

I have seen, and now I show the others, what those crews saw. Blackness and the absence of light. A new void at the galactic coordinates where the stars and worlds of Signus once shone.

The Signus Cluster no longer exists. A monumental dark mass has taken its place, swallowing up whoever did not fear to tread on those blighted worlds. Some say that those within have been taken to hell, if such a thing exists. I would weep for my Great Angel if only I could.

The tragedy of it thunders in my mind, almost too big to comprehend. The Legion, erased from existence. All my brothers, my comrades in arms, my angelic father, *gone*.

Do I truly believe Sanguinius is lost to us? It shames me to say it, but in this moment, I do. I believe that *all* is lost.

Hezen is nodding. 'The Regent cannot simply expect us to go quietly into oblivion! He must know that we would not accept dissolution without argument!'

Dissolution. Such a weak word for so great an act, so final a judgement. The systematic decommissioning of a Space Marine Legion; the repossession and redistribution of every last item of materiel, from bolt-shell to battleship. It is the closure of the book of hours on a legacy that has endured since the days of Old Night, the promise of the final end of the Blood Angels.

Not in glorious battle, fighting an intractable enemy until the very last of us perish – but a death by pen and ink, the work of administrators, politicians and strategists. It sickens and enrages me in equal measure. This is not the way of the Imperium I am oath-sworn to fight for!

'We are not dead!' shouts Nagal, and a handful of others take up the cry. 'Even… Even if this is true,' he says, glaring at the black scroll, 'there are still twenty living sons of Sanguinius! Twenty souls are enough to rebuild this Legion.'

'*One* would be enough,' growls Hezen. 'No matter if it takes a thousand years, we can restore our strength.'

‘If you had millennia, that would be so.’ I turn, and I see Rubio standing behind me. How he entered and approached without my knowledge is disturbing. ‘But these are difficult times, Blood Angel. The hardest times our Imperium has ever faced.’

‘You have no right to be here!’ says Nagal. ‘The Annex is for the scions of our Legion and no other.’

Rubio ignores him, looking to me instead. I feel the psyker reading me, knowing the dread in my hearts. He nods grimly. ‘The war with Horus threatens to rip the galaxy in two. Priorities change. As a surgeon must sacrifice a limb to save a life, so the Sigillite makes the difficult decisions. I regret that your Legion has fallen on the scales of such a choice.’

‘Speak plainly.’ I find my voice again. ‘If you are to be our executioner, Rubio, then grant us that!’

He bows slightly, and takes in the scope of the fortress-monastery with the motion of his hand. ‘The war machine that powers a Legion, the gene-engines and the weapons stocks, the whole of it… The strategic value of such hardware is incalculable, and it cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of the traitors. It must be protected, nurtured, so that reinforcements can be brought to the battle in due course.’

‘The rebellion will not last that long,’ says Hezen.

‘Can you be sure?’ Rubio replies. ‘The Sigillite foresees all possibilities. Even now, on distant Titan, he makes ready a new weapon, a new breed of warriors. *Malcador prepares*.’ He indicates his armour. ‘I, and others like me, have been called to assist in his deeds.’

‘You would gut our fortress for this?’ Nagal’s tone is flat and cold. ‘When we are at our lowest ebb, the Regent would come to Baal like a carrion eater and strip it bare? Is that why you are here?’ He advances on Rubio, fists clenching. ‘To pick us to the bones?’

‘Yes,’ replies the psyker. ‘Cargo leviathans are coming, crewed by recovery battalions from the loyal factions of the Mechanicum. They will remove what is needed.’

‘Get out,’ Nagal snarls.

‘I have more to say–’

‘*Get out!*’ bellows the warrior. I watch Rubio pause, then bow again. When he is gone, Nagal’s ire returns to me. ‘You should have let us go, Arkad. Damn your blood, you should have let us go!’

I face him. ‘If I had, then there would be nothing left of us.’

‘Look around,’ Nagal demands. ‘Soon that will be so.’

His words remind me of the dream.

We never speak of the dream, although we all shared some iteration of it.

Those in true slumber – if a Space Marine can ever truly sleep – saw it most strongly, but even those of us who were awake, standing our posts or at practice, experienced a measure of the…

I hesitate to call it a vision*.*

What did I see? A jumble of images, flickering through my thoughts like a half-recalled memory. A world of blood-red sands, but not Baal. Fire in the sky. A great creature, more beast than man, but blurred so that I could not define its characteristics.

An axe in the creature’s hands. A mighty blow and hundreds of my kinsmen dead.

Among it all, Sanguinius, his wings spread wide. I saw him falling, even as I knew that the Angel never falls.

Then it was gone, but in the wake a terrible, brief fury awoke in me. It was a strange kind of anger, far removed and hard to grasp. I felt somehow… tainted *by the passing of its touch.*

In the times before the Emperor’s illumination, this dream would have been called an omen*.*

But after that day, no warrior among the twenty spoke of it again, as if to give voice to what the dream suggested would make it a certainty.

The summons brings me to the landing pad, where Rubio’s Storm Eagle remains, poised like a patient raptor ready to throw itself into the sky.

I confess I had already made my decision, as I walked through the Silent Cloister and along the upper galleries. Nothing the psyker can say will change my mind.

‘Speak,’ I insist, as he emerges from the interior of the lander.

‘I have an offer for you and your brothers, Arkad. An opportunity.’ His tone seems genuine. I wonder for a moment, did Rubio once stand where I do now, a loss so great it cannot be measured weighing upon him? The warrior removes the power sword on his belt, scabbard and all, and shows it to me. ‘Before, you asked me my rank and Legion. I was once a warrior of the Thirteenth, the Ultramarines.’ Rubio turns the weapon so I may see the shape of the revered Ultima upon the hilt. ‘I am lost to my Legion as certainly as if the sons of Macragge were dead and gone.’ There is no exaggeration to these words; I hear

the pain in his voice and I believe him.

'And now you are Malcador's agent?'

He nods. 'One of many. Some of us legionaries, from brotherhoods on both sides of the insurrection. Others mortal and… otherwise. I have a new purpose now.'

He speaks of the Sigillite's works in the Sol system, the deeds done in the Emperor's name, but not with true openness. All across the stars, he tells me, measures are being taken. Ships and men silently diverted to where they will be most needed in the battles to come. Military equipment, gene-tech and the building blocks of a Legion's infrastructure. All to Lord Malcador's design, all to combat not Horus Lupercal's treachery, but the dark forces the Warmaster has awakened.

I find it hard to follow, until he makes the offer. Then I see.

Rubio holds out his hand. 'Join me, Arkad. You and your brothers. The black scroll may mark the ending of your Legion, but it need not be the end of your duty to Terra.'

'You would have us give up our colours for those?' I study his ghost-grey wargear, and tap the winged blood drop across the chest of my night-black armour. 'I will die before I surrender that. If Sanguinius has been taken from us, we lost sons… then to shrug off our identity like some discarded cloak would be the greatest insult to his memory!'

'You don't understand.'

'I understand.' Rubio stands his ground as I advance towards him. 'I speak for all my brothers. Your offer is refused.'

To his credit, he does not waste breath trying to convince me otherwise. 'Very well. I have one last demand of you, then.' The psyker returns his sheathed blade to his belt and offers me a vox-module. 'Your ships in orbit, the guardian flotilla… I have given them Malcador's orders to disperse and strike their colours–'

A smile comes to my lips, a swell of pride to my hearts. 'But they do not obey?' In that moment, the humans, the crew-serfs and the mortal officers, they remind me that one need not be a legionary to be of the Legion.

'The shipmasters refuse to accept the Sigillite's commands unless you authorise them. Arkad, you must release the fleet from their oath to the Blood Angels.'

'I will not.' I hear footfalls. Ceramite boots upon the stone, the sound of armoured warriors rising to fill the ranks behind me. I turn to see their faces, but each one of my kinsmen has hidden his visage behind his helmet.

And their armour…

They no long wear the blood-crimson of our Legion. Dark layers of inkstone stain have blackened their wargear to a shade similar to mine. The only marks of incarnadine that remain are brazen red saltires that cross over their chests, their shoulders. The stark lines of scarlet are like bloody wounds.

It is Nagal who leads them. 'If we are truly in the company of death,' he intones, 'then it is fitting that all who look upon us shall know it.'

My pride grows ever stronger, and I see the questions in Rubio's gaze as I turn back to him. 'Where is Horus Lupercal, brother? Under what blighted rock does the turncoat hide?'

Rubio reads our collective intent immediately. 'You seek to face the Warmaster. The twenty of you against the might of his armies, his traitor Legions? You will die.'

'By the Sigillite's word, we are already dead,' snarls Hezen. 'We will find Horus and kill him. Or die in the attempt.'

'What other end can we aspire to?' I ask, and I see Rubio's manner hardening. 'Anyone who has given their fealty to the Great Angel may follow us, if that is their wish.'

The psyker draws his Ultramarine gladius, slowly and deliberately. The sword's blade glows, and in concert with it, the crystals of his psychic hood come alive. 'I cannot allow that. Master your own fates if you will, for you are of the Legiones Astartes and that is your right. But those ships belong to the Imperium, and Terra.' The tip of the blade points at my head. He still holds out the vox-module. 'Tell them to stand down, Brother Arkad.'

'No.' The crozius arcanum is suddenly in my hand. The aura crackles into being, glowing blue-white.

In this moment, I am fully ready to commit the most unthinkable of acts. I am ready to kill another Space Marine for what I believe to be right, and I know that the battle-brothers standing behind me will not stay my hand. They will see it good and raise no reproach. I am ready to end the life of Tylos Rubio if that is what it will take.

In a way, the feeling is… *liberating*. Is this what Horus' traitors so desired? And once it is done, will it be easier to kill again, and again? For that is the threshold we now stand upon, and the path beyond will be marked with the blood of warriors we might once have called brother, might once have fought alongside.

And then a cry comes from human lips before our weapons can meet. 'Wait!

Wait! Hold your blows, in the Angel's name!'

Nagal, Hezen and the others part like a dark curtain, to allow a man's approach. A spindly thing he is, clad in velvet robes. He stumbles as if he is dizzy. Ser Jesper, the Master of Speakers, tries his best to run to us. Behind him trail cords of rope-wound wires and ritual bonds. He has come at a mad pace from the fortress-monastery's astropathic seclusium, and done so with such urgency that he is in great disarray. It concerns me to see Jesper in this state, for whatever news he brings must be of the greatest import. The poor telepath is not properly decompressed from his psi-sendings. Weak, watery blood runs from the corners of his eyes.

The astropath collapses, but Hezen is there to catch him. He brings him to us, bearing the weakened, fallen man like a child.

'Heed me,' croaks Jesper. He is barely awake, but something in the waif-like form keeps him conscious long enough to speak. His tone becomes the sing-song of mimic repetition as he gives the meme-codes that prove his message to be authentic. He is relaying a communication from the stars. 'Raldoron speaks across the wild and screaming distances,' he whispers.

'The First Captain?' Nagal stiffens at the mention of the name. Our brother Raldoron was called to be at the Angel's side at Signus. Suddenly, Jesper's near-panic is understood.

'He speaks…' The astropath is dying. He has killed himself to rip this message from the tumult of the ruinstorm, sacrificed his life because he knew it would save us. I am humbled by his act. '*Sanguinius lives*. The Legion endures.'

It is the last communiqué Ser Jesper grants us; I hear the final beat of his heart.

Rubio cannot deny what he has heard, even as his vox-bead crackles with confirmation from his own astropaths aboard the cruiser. His sword sinks towards the ground.

I raise my crozius, Baal's red sunlight casting it like spilled blood. 'Go back, Rubio. Take your ship and your orders, and go to Malcador with empty hands and empty holds.' My hearts sing as I say the words.

'He counted you lost too soon,' says the psyker.

'We were never lost.' I shake my head. 'We are Blood Angels.'

And that is answer enough.

CHILD OF NIGHT

John French

‘What are the decrees of the past, but the seeds of a future reckoning?’

– common saying in the hives of Albia, noted by Tenghost Merrin
in *The Court of The Unspeakable King, Volume I*

‘I submit to your judgement,’ I speak the words, and bow my head before the gun.

The legionary does not move. His finger tenses upon the trigger of his bolt pistol. A single twitch and the firing pin will strike the primer. The charge will ram the warhead down the pistol barrel and out into the still air between the muzzle and my skull. An instant later its secondary charge will fire. By the time it hits my skull it will be travelling at over a thousand metres per second. An instant after it has punched into my brain, it will detonate, scattering blood, bone and shrapnel into the air.

All it takes for that fatal chain to begin is for the warrior to twitch his finger. All it takes is for him to judge me as deserving to die. His green eye-lenses stare down at me – I can feel them upon the bare skin of my scalp.

I am kneeling, my cloak of rags hanging from me like sodden feathers. He is armoured, of course, though the colour of his battleplate is lost beneath the skin of darkness. Here, nothing remains whole; everything corrodes to shadow in the end.

I was born down here, in the prison sinks beneath Albia, down here in the abyss, which is the realm of the banished and the condemned. I was raised from this night when the Great Crusade had already left the light of Sol, though only by a few decades. That makes me old compared to most, but young compared to some. The scent of destiny was thick in the air in those days. The dark ignorance of the past fled before the illumination of truth, and nothing could defy it. It was a time when the light of glory burned bright before us all. We felt it, every son of the Legions.

In truth, that light was the first light I ever knew. Perhaps it is the only light I have ever known? Now I exist here again, cradled in the blackness that bores my idle mind, hiding from my sins, and all light is lost to me once more.

I raise my head, and look up into the green slashes of light that are his eyes. 'Would you at least know who it is that you have come to kill?'

'I know who you are, Fel Zharost, dream-eater of the Eighth Legion.' The warrior's vox-grille clicks as he pauses. 'I have come for you.'

Clever. If this were not a warrior who had tracked and hounded me through the dark for nights on end, then I would say he was being humorous.

'You know my name, but that is not enough to judge a life before you take it,' I warn him. 'Trust me on this.'

'I need know nothing else of you.'

'Judgement should be blind, not ignorant.' I take a long breath and look up into the barrel of the bolt pistol and the glowing green eyes beyond. I wonder what he sees: an old man kneeling in the dirt, a ragged beard falling from a face of scars and creases? Or does he see something else? Something less… pitiful. 'You should know whom it is you punish. That was always the way.' I raise my left hand and touch it to my forehead. 'I would show you that.'

He does not move. His finger remains steady on the trigger, balanced between life and death.

'No,' he says.

I smile, but not in humour. If I am to die then it will be on my terms. After all, what are we if we abandon the truths we lived by?

'It was not an offer,' I say, and I show him the past.

It began in darkness, of course – in that lost age when I was a child without innocence.

I opened my eyes, and became blind.

Gunfire burst just ahead of me as I leapt towards a ledge. The flare-light boiled through my vision, burned bright, bubbling with neon smears and white splinters. I was spinning through the air, my eyes and mind churning with blinding thunderclouds. The light was fire inside my skull. I slammed into something hard and began to slide down it, my arms scrabbling at the air. A hand grabbed my arm. I felt whipcord muscle and smooth skin. I began to fight, but the light was still burning through my senses. The arm yanked me up and slammed me down onto hard metal. Breath left me, but I kicked out and tried to scramble away. An arm looped around my throat and tightened.

‘Stillness,’ the voice hissed in my ear.

I stopped moving. I recognised the voice. It is strange to think of her now, and stranger still to speak of her. Calliope – that is how I remember her. It was not her name, though. She had no name. The tongue of the night-born was a tongue of clicks, of breath sighing through closed teeth, of sounds that do not echo in still air. In that tongue there are no names. But she needs a name. She deserves a name.

‘I cannot see,’ I replied, my breath ragged in my throat.

‘Why did you open your eyes?’

I did not reply. In truth I did not know. Sometimes stupidity does not require a reason.

‘I should have left you where I found you. I should have cut your throat and used you as a lure for the hungering ones.’

The words were real, and if she had been any other of our siblings then she would have done it too. But she had not before, and she did not then.

‘Where is the prey?’ I asked, trembling as pain drained through me.

‘Close,’ she said, as calm as still water. ‘It does not know where we are now.’

‘How many?’

‘One, just one.’

‘What is it?’

She said nothing for a long heartbeat.

‘I do not know, but it will die before we do.’

The hunter had been waiting for us when we entered the web. It was huge, but it moved as fast as anything I had ever known. Its gun had torn the dark, and we had run, scrambling and swinging through the girders as the explosions danced behind us. I had no idea who or what it was, but I understood it. Just as we preyed upon those who fell from the world of light above, so this creature had now come for us.

But we were not used to being prey. Down there, amongst the murderers and scum of the world above, we were the hunters.

‘We wait?’ I asked. The scars left by the light were draining from my sight, hunger and anger replacing fear.

‘Yes,’ she breathed. ‘And then we track it, and take its heart.’

She was grinning, the smallest wisp of light catching the sharpened points of her teeth.

‘We take its heart,’ I echoed.

I became still. The beating of my blood slowed. I could feel rust and moisture

under my skin, a patina of cracks, and the lumps of rivets.

We waited, and the blackness flowed over us. The low sounds of the caverns began to manifest: the slow creak of kilometres of compressed and tangled metal sighing as they shift, the song of subtle air currents blowing through tunnels and caverns, the tap-tap-tap of moisture falling onto rusted iron.

Those who live under the light-suns, or in the glow of a furnace, or amongst the glimmer of machines, think of the dark as absence. But darkness has texture – it has folds and heights like deep water that plunges down without end. It was said that there were once natural oceans here on Terra, and that the greatest darkness lived in the trenches far beneath their surfaces. If there is any truth to such tales, then perhaps the darkness was not drained with the seas.

Perhaps it simply flowed away into deeper places. To this place.

We both became part of that darkness. We vanished. It was not a mystery, or a power drawn from beyond. It was one very simple thing: stillness. The dark takes you when you are still. It makes you a part of it. Your body dissolves into slivers of shape, the features of your face become like the folds of cloth in a curtain, your fingers like leaves in a forest. Some might say that such a trick is a quirk of survival, but not for us. Not for the children of the night. We learned it because of what we were born to be. We learned it as murderers.

Time stretched, defined only by the slow beat of my heart.

At last, Calliope spoke.

‘It is moving away,’ she said, her fingers dancing silently on my arm. ‘It makes for the upper levels. We should follow it.’

I did not reply, but unfolded from the ledge and jumped into the waiting blackness. I landed on a beam and ran upwards, feet and hands making no sound on the damp-slicked surface. I felt a void open before me and leapt. Cold metal met my hand for an instant, and I swung high, landed, and ran on. Calliope was just behind me. We were two pale ghosts dancing across the lightless web, silent and swift.

The hunter who was now our prey was fast, very fast. Even without seeing him, I could feel his strength shaking the web of girders as he moved. I was not thinking why he had come for us as I swung and ran after him. My only thought was that he was not one of our kind, that he had tried to kill us, and so would die. It was not anger, it was just fact.

Then the prey halted.

We slid closer, soft shadows amongst shadows. An electric hum filled the air, scratching against my teeth. It was turning its head as if looking around, though I

doubted it could see. We moved closer. Calliope swung away to approach from a different angle – you never take prey alone, or from a single direction. Still the prey did not move. Perhaps it was lost? The deep dark can do that, can swallow direction and memory and leave only madness.

I slid the glass splinter blade from the bindings on my wrist. Softly, feeling my way, I crawled until I was above the prey. I took a long, silent breath – I could smell the blood upon it now. It had killed. There was something else too, a stink like hot wiring and oiled machines. I turned my head slowly, listening, feeling the metal beneath by skin tremble.

I tensed. Calliope would move first; that was our way, an understanding that we had never discussed and never needed to explain to one another. The splinter of glass was warm in my fingers.

Calliope swung out from the black, the noise of her leap almost imperceptible.

Almost.

The prey's head turned with a machine whir. Its eyes lit. Red light stabbed through the girder-web. Calliope struck the prey as it turned. Light shattered from the glass blade in her hand as she rammed it into the prey's neck. It was huge, a man made of metal and hard angles. The blade broke and the prey was still turning, blink-fast, hand snapping closed around Calliope's throat.

I jumped, my own blade held in two hands.

The prey was holding Calliope in the air. She was thrashing, clawing at its wrist. I landed on the prey's shoulders, and stabbed the glass blade down into its neck with all my weight and all my strength. The prey arched. Blood gushed up around my hands, thick and warm.

I dropped from its shoulders as it staggered.

Calliope wrenched herself from its faltering grip. The prey shuddered, its red eyes glowing like windows into a realm of blood. Calliope did not run. She still had a piece of the blade in her hand. She stabbed it up and into one of the prey's red glowing eyes. Its head snapped back, but it did not fall.

It raised its hand, and fire split the red-stained gloom.

Time stopped. Everything stopped.

In those days I did not understand my gift, or even know that it was a gift. Sometimes I would see things without needing my eyes. Sometimes I would know things without understanding how. Sometimes I would fall into dreams of gold and fire. And in that moment of frozen flame, I felt the last roaring beat of Calliope's heart, and touched the jagged ice of her killer's mind.

Panic flooded me. I could not move. All I could see was the bloody figure

standing before me, the wet plates of its armour lit by the static flare of its gun.

The world snapped back, and the roar of flame and noise drowned Calliope's last breath. Then there was silence, and the slow patter of liquid on metal. I could not move. I did not want to. My skin was wet, my mouth and nose filled with the scent of gunfire. I was blind again, but somehow I could still see.

All I could think was that I was alone again, that I would now always be alone.

The figure before me lowered his weapon and turned towards me. Slowly it raised a hand and pulled its helmet off. The head beneath was broad and skinless, and looked back at me with its one remaining, utterly black eye. Blood seeped from the bloody ruin in the other socket, rolling down its cheek. He spoke then, his voice almost a whisper. I did not understand what he meant at the time.

Later, much later, I thought I did. Now I know that even then I still did not.

'I have come for you,' he said.

Mortinar, Seventy-First Prefect of the Saragorn Enclave, snapped upright, his heart racing, eyes wide, breath heaving through his open mouth. He turned his head, blinking at the clean light which filled the council chamber.

'Sir?'

Hasina was looking at him. Her false-flesh face did not allow for expression, but her eyes glittered with confusion. Behind her, the rest of his aides and staff waited, shifting in nervous silence. He looked around again, still breathing hard. Carved and gilded faces looked back at him from niches in the walls, their blank eyes reflecting the lamp glow.

'A nightmare,' he managed. He looked down at his hand trembling at the end of his velvet sleeve. 'Yes, just a nightmare.' He looked up again in time to see glances pass between the gathered aides.

'Sir…' began Tolrek, his eyes averted. The young guard captain looked uncertain, his tongue pausing on his silvered teeth. 'You have not been asleep. You called us here to discuss the Fourth Program's progress. You were just saying that–'

It came back to the prefect then, the rushing panic, the blare of alarms. Why were they all standing around like cattle? Why were they just staring at him?

'How far have the attackers advanced?' he snapped, hurrying over to his desk and triggering its hololith data display. 'What are our casualties?' His eyes flicked across the cone of luminous data, searching for the status of the enclave's garrison.

Corimino, his third life-ward, broke the silence next.

'My master, there are no attackers.'

'They are here!' he roared, slamming his fist into the stone top of his desk. 'Don't lie to me! Don't you dare!' Images were creeping back into his mind, images of the enclave burning under a bruised, black sky. He strode to the window, and slammed his palm down on the shutter control. The leaves of gilt plasteel folded into the frame. 'They are–'

Sunlight, bright and clear, shone from a clear sky above the enclave's spires and domes. He stepped back, blinking in the brilliance.

It was there, all there, untouched by darkness or fire. He blinked, smudges of gunfire still clinging to his memory. He turned slowly to his staff. They were all looking at him, and he could see the unease on their faces.

'Is something wrong, sir?' asked Hasina, carefully.

He opened his mouth to speak.

Behind him black cloud poured across the sky like ink poured across clean paper. And from the spreading night, the fire fell. He opened his mouth, and–

He awoke, the expanding dream blinking into the real nightmare which surrounded him.

Alarms screamed. Dust tumbled from the ceiling. The metal shutters over the windows shook in their frames. Armed guards crowded the spaces by the doors. His aides were shouting at each other. A hololithic display was flickering in and out of focus above his desk. Maps, data and information fizzed through the static, telling a story that simply could not be true. Distortion wailed from the speakers embedded high in the walls. Hasina was hammering at the vox-console keys, shouting for someone in the enclave guard, demanding help, demanding a report. Her voice was raw and cracked with panic.

The vox popped suddenly, screeched and then cleared. A voice rose from the speaker horn, as clear as if it were coming from within the room.

The prefect recognised the voice. It was Tolrek. The guard captain had gone to the northern bastion an hour before.

'*Sir…*'

Everyone in the chamber went still and quiet.

'*S-sir…*'

The prefect leaned forwards, his hands clenched into fists on the tabletop.

'Tolrek, what is the situation?'

A noise came from the vox, low at first then growing. The prefect did not recognise it for a second – then he realised that Tolrek was weeping.

‘*They… They took my eyes, sir. They took my hands. They say that they will take my tongue once this is done. They say that I belong to the darkness now.*’

‘Tolrek–’ the prefect began, rage blending with the terror in his blood.

‘*They say that you must understand their judgement before…*’ A wet sob bubbled into the silence. ‘*They say… They say that they are coming for you.*’

The prefect stared at the vox, his tongue still in a dry mouth. Behind him the shutters stopped rattling. ‘Who,’ he began, fighting to force authority into his voice. ‘Who are you?’

The new voice that came in answer was soft, and edged by distortion, but it seemed to fill the room.

‘*We are retribution.*’

The vox cut out. For a second he did not move, and then he turned slowly to the windows. The shutters clattered open, and he–

He awoke, cold flooding through him, a shout dying on his lips. He stumbled up from his chair, and his leg slammed into the corner of something hard. He yelped as the pain bit.

Pain. That meant that what he was experiencing was real, at least, and not another part of his endless nightmare.

He tried blinking, but still could not see. He reached out, feeling the polished surface of the desk which he had just walked into. The activation stud for the lights should be just–

His fingers touched upon something wet and warm.

He snapped his hand back. His heart was hammering.

Water. It must be water, he thought. He rubbed his fingers. The fluid on their tips felt sticky. He thought of the sweet wine he ordered before retiring to read the reports, and imagined how it must have spilled from the glass when he knocked the desk. He reached out again, careful not to touch the surface. He found the activation stud, and pressed it.

The room filled with light, and screamed.

He awoke, his eyes snapping open, the scream trembling in his throat. He was lying on the floor, his back against the wall beneath the shutters. The room was dark, but an aching pulse filled the air, like the growl of an active machine. He thought that he had been dreaming, that it had just been–

The eye-lenses of my helm lit up. I stood from where I had crouched beside him. The prefect tried to scream again, but vomited instead. I looked down at him, and around my head the crystal matrix of my psychic hood began to glow with a

pale light.

‘Who are you?’ he choked. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘You know what I am.’

His eyes darted across the midnight plates of my armour, the thunderbolt and eagle wing markings, the numerals etched onto the bronze solar disk upon my breastplate. I leaned on my staff, both hands resting upon the crystal-cored iron. Recognition and fear form in his mind even as part of his brain tries to deny it.

‘I have done nothing,’ he stammers. ‘I serve the Emperor. I am true to the Unity of Te–’

‘The gene-warrens, prefect. The Wet Vaults, the millions spliced together as flesh and bone – the First Program, and the Second, and the Third. The city beneath this city which swallowed all those who fell outside acceptable ranges of variation. The smell that meant that you decided to dissolve the castoffs rather than burn them.’

He began to weep, tears rolling from the corners of his eyes. I watch him for a few seconds, and then I speak again.

‘We are not here to determine innocence or guilt. That time is past. We are not here for justice, or to save the millions that you have tainted. We are here to reward you. We are the consequence of your actions. We are its hand, and its kindly edge. And…’

I bent down, the joints of my armour whirring, and touched the trembling man’s face.

‘…we have come for you.’

He shook, trembling with terror and defiance. ‘Your judgement is atrocity. That is not justice, it is hypocrisy!’

‘But we are not creatures made to live those ideals, only to bring them into being.’

For a moment he simply hugged his arms close around himself. He was nothing to look at: a thin man, his age hidden but not banished, wrapped in velvet and silk, weeping in the dark. A stale reek rose from his huddled form. He had soiled himself several hours earlier, in his feverish nightmare state.

‘Everything I saw before, everything I dreamed…’

‘It was only a dream.’ He looked up at me, and his pupils showed that desperate spark of hope that mortals can yet summon even in the bleakest of moments.

‘But that does not mean that it was not real. You have dreamed those moments twenty times already, and you will dream them again.’ I run the finger of my gauntlet across his tear-dampened upper lip. ‘This is the eighth time we have

talked, and the eighth time you have wept these tears. It will not be the last.'

'You…' he stammers. 'You are waiting for me to ask for forgiveness?'

'No. You have already asked for that eight times.'

He began to laugh then. He was still laughing as I dragged him back into the wheel of nightmares.

'What is your judgement?'

My voice rolled through the vast space. The throne room was silent and bare. The gloom which filled its vaulted space felt lifeless, like an absence left by something intangible. I kept my gaze steady on those ghost-pale features, and the black eyes watching me from the foot of the empty throne. I did not kneel – authority was one thing, respect was another. The pale face twitched, the lips twisting into the mockery of a smile.

'My judgement?' He paused, and tapped one finger upon the haft of his chainglaive. 'My judgement is that if I have to spend any more time in your company then I might be tempted to do something you would regret.'

Sevatar stepped from the throne's dais to the floor. His movements, even in armour, were like those of a cat. I did not move. Out of habit I made to lean on my staff, but like the hood which had once circled my skull, it was gone. Their absence felt as though I had lost a limb, like a part of me had been stripped away.

That, of course, was precisely the point, and the reason why I stood in a deserted throne room with the First Captain of our thrice-humbled Legion.

'The edict from the Council of Nikaea cannot be ignored,' I said. 'You are the most senior commander of the Legion while the primarch–'

'While our father-in-darkness is being schooled again by his brothers.' Sevatar turned away, rolling a shoulder absent-mindedly. 'Yes, I suppose I am.'

'There must be a judgement upon the Librarius.' I paused, the next words I must speak catching in my throat. 'And upon me.'

Sevatar glanced back at me, the shark's smile on his lips echoed in his dark eyes.

'I could always cut your throat?' He turned to look at me, cocking his head and raising an eyebrow. 'Yes. That could solve several problems.'

I let out a slow breath between my teeth. To say that there was little brotherly affection between us would be to call the sun a candle.

I kept my gaze steady on his face. Those who did not know us always said that Night Lords from the under-realms of Terra and the spoil heap of Nostramo are much alike – true, pale skin and eyes polished black by night marked us all, but

to the few who looked further we were altogether different creatures. The black sinks bred a flatness to our features. Our eyes are more sensitive to sunlight even than theirs. We rarely blink. Our skin is naturally hairless, our teeth sharp without the need to file them. There were few enough of us left in the Legion by then, an ill-favoured and withering remnant. I wish that I could say that those of us who remained were an island of slowly fading nobility, but that would have been a lie.

There were few who saw the difference between what we had been and what we had become. Even those who had once served judgement were now servants to terror. Sometimes I wondered if there ever was a difference.

'The decree…' I began carefully.

'You really hate us, don't you? All of us who came after, who came from a different kind of night.'

I said nothing, and the First Captain's corpse grin spread wider. 'Oh, I am not judging your hatred. I share it. It just hurts me less.'

'Sevatarion…'

I paused, and forced control into my voice. A little of my anger bled into the air between us as a sparkle of frost. Strangely, he had gone very, very still.

'Jago Sevatarion, you will give me what I demand of you.'

The words melted the mockery of humour from his face. He crossed the room in a flash of lightning battleplate and servos. The deactivated chain-glaive struck me in the chest before I could even raise my hands.

I fell, but his hand caught my throat and pulled me in close. When his voice came, it was a hissing whisper.

'If you are so desperate for judgement, then here is mine – I cast you out. You are no longer of the Eighth, if you ever were. I stain your hands red. I condemn you to death, should we ever meet again. You are outcast. You are nothing.' He shoved me away, and I hit the floor with a clatter of ceramite on stone. He stood, his face still, shadows pooling in his eye sockets. 'Does that satisfy?'

I rose. I was not shocked, or broken. I was angry. I could taste blood on my tongue. The rage twisted and burned brighter even as I tried to restrain it.

But I was not angry at his judgement. No, this anger was nothing so small in scope.

'And the rest of the Librarius?'

'I do not care,' he spat, and turned to walk back towards our primarch's throne.

'It was about something once, Sevatarion,' I called, my voice brittle with rage. He looked over his shoulder, his smile back in place. 'We were more than this

once. It was all for a reason.'

'Spare me from the guardians of nostalgia,' he said with a roll of his eyes.

It happened then, before the thought could form in my conscious mind, before I was even aware that I had lost control. Green flames spread up the walls. Sevatar was turning, chainblade roaring to life as the wave of force struck and slammed him into the throne. Between the flicker-pulse of flame and shadow, my hand was at his throat, the fingers closing around the neck seal and the flesh beneath.

'You murdered us,' I snarled.

My teeth were bared, and lightning crawled across my scalp. The teeth of the chain-glaive were still spinning, but my mind was wrapped around his limbs, squeezing, crushing. I had no thought for what I was doing, or of the decree which forbade it.

'You are killing our Legion.' I slammed his head into the iron of the throne with only a twitch of thought. Servos whined as he fought against me. 'You and your poisoned world are–'

Flash. Jagged un-light. Brain-fire. Agony.

I staggered back, blood pouring from my mouth, splattering down my armour and onto my bare, empty hands. Truly marked by blood, now, was the only thought I could manage as my head whirled with sights and memories that were not my own.

Sevatar did not rise to follow me. He was sitting on the primarch's throne, breathing hard, his eyes fixed on the empty space where I thought I had seized him.

'Go,' he rasped.

'Sevatarion–' I began, gulping air through clotting blood.

'Get out of my sight!'

I regarded him carefully for a few heartbeats, then turned and left the throne room.

I look up again at my shadowy executioner. Frost has spread over his armour. He has shared my past for an eye-blink of time, but in that instant I have shown him every moment of my life – from the day that the Legion came to me, to the steps that led me back into the darkness below Terra's crust. To the only home I ever knew.

I allow him to recover, and then I speak.

'I knew you would come. Judgement comes for us all in the end, cousin.'

I let out a breath, and draw another. It will be my last, of that I am sure. It tastes

of damp and blood, of a world that has never known the light of day. For a moment I wonder which sin has brought my end. Was it Nikaea, and the fact that I walked free still using my gifts? Was it the blood that flows in my veins, my Legion's conduct finally fallen beyond the last limits of Imperial tolerance? Or has the new age finally come, the age in which mankind no longer needed monsters and heroes?

I dismiss the notion. The reason does not matter, only the consequence.

'I will ask one thing more from you, though,' I say to the warrior standing over me. 'I would see the light of the sun one last time.'

I reach into his mind then. Until now it has been my thoughts and memories projecting into the space of his thoughts. Now I take his measure and see through his eyes. I see Sol hanging in the void, and the scattered light of countless stars beyond. Even after these last waning years spent down in the darkness, it is still as beautiful and terrible as I remember.

And then I see why he has come for me.

I see betrayal, and broken oaths, and the deaths of sons at the hands of their fathers. I see what the vision of Imperial Truth and light has now become.

I let go of his mind. He shudders, and his finger tightens upon the trigger.

Can this be true? Can this really be what the galaxy has come to? And there in the darkness, at the core of everything I was and everything I became, is the answer, laughing at me through sharpened teeth.

The Space Marine, armoured plainly in grey, stares at me for a long moment, then lowers his pistol. 'I am not here to judge you, Fel Zharost. That right belongs to another.'

I nod. I know now why he has come for me, and what awaits me after this moment. I have seen it in his thoughts, like a final jest.

'Rise,' he says.

LUNA MENDAX

Graham McNeill

Peace. The word was meaningless to him. As far back as Loken could remember, he had never known any state of being that could equate to the concept as it was now explained to him. The word had served as a talisman once, back when the universe made sense, an ideal for which to strive. An end of war and the fulfilment of the task for which he and his brothers had been created. He was of the Legiones Astartes, a warrior born and bred, wrought in the Emperor's gene-labs with forgotten alchemy and unknown science.

What could a being who knew only how to kill understand of peace?

Yet here in the garden, Loken felt something close to it.

Warm sunlight shone in a flickering blue sky, entoptically rendered on the curved inner face of the dome, yet no less pleasing for its artifice. Pictographic clouds drifted in a non-existent breeze, and birdsong chirped from artfully concealed vox-grilles worked into the garden's structure.

The garden was composed of rough ouslite slabs laid like giant flagstones, arranged around a series of square, shallow basins of crystal-clear water. Lilies and bright flowers flourished in rock pools fed by a branch system hived from the brass tower's reservoirs. Ferns and weeping trees caressed the water's edge, and something in their placement stirred a long-buried memory, though one Loken found himself unwilling to examine too closely.

He made his way through the garden, enjoying the quiet and the warm scents of living things. Water gurgled over an ornamented arrangement of smooth rocks, and fell in a spuming waterfall that tumbled into a miniature lake of glitter-gold koi. Curved steps led down to neat rows of planting beds, where the seeds Loken had planted were already beginning to grow.

Clad in a long chiton of unadorned grey over a tan bodyglove with plastek-seals over his armour interface sockets, he was armed only with a few gardening tools hanging from a leather work belt. Loken walked with the heavy steps of a mourner at a memorial, his shoulders broad, but hunched, as though they carried the weight of the world upon them. His features were broad and flat, made blunt by war and drained of joy by betrayal.

Yet as he surveyed the green shoots pushing their way out of the dark soil to the light above, the thinnest trace of a smile came to his lips. Bred to kill, not to care, it gave Loken a sense of the wonder of creation. By his hand was this universe in miniature flourishing.

His eyes narrowed as he saw one corner of the planting beds green with an altogether unwelcome growth of weeds and enveloped with a spun sugar gleam of gossamer-fine spider webs. Loken unhooked a trowel from his belt, one that was entirely too small for his grip, but which he handled with surprising delicacy. He could have asked for tools better suited to his transhuman scale, but the forges of the brass tower were tasked with the production of more important things than mere gardening implements.

Like any warrior, he learned to make do with what he had.

Loken knelt on the corner slab and swept away the spider webs with his hands. Arachnids emerged from hiding at the disturbance, and he flinched at the sight of them. The multi-limbed creatures sparked a memory fragment in Loken: a war of gruelling attrition, hard-fought victories and a glorious time when gods did not make war on one another.

He couldn't place the memory, but that was nothing unusual. The madness that almost consumed him on Isstvan III had left scars that were slow to heal and quick to flare in jagged pain. The spiders contented themselves with baring their fangs then retreating into their subterranean lairs, and Loken felt an irrational hatred of the creatures swell in his heart.

He dug into the soil with vicious jabs, laying the weed-roots on the slab beside him and seeking to drive the spiders out. This section was particularly overgrown with parasitic plant matter, which was in the process of draining the goodness from the soil and choking the life out of the crop growing here. The seeds had been sown before he had found the garden, and had withered once already, but with his patient attention, the garden had bloomed once again, brighter and more vital than ever.

The previous custodian of this biodome had allowed it to grow wild, neglecting the task of prudent weeding and maintenance. He had since learned that Sister

Elliana was long dead on Prospero, and no one had taken up her duties in the biodome. An understandable lapse. The maintenance of a space that existed for purely aesthetic reasons would be seen as wasteful.

And in times of war, nothing wasteful could be tolerated.

Loken had found the biodome by chance, staring vacantly through the armourglass window of the orbital shuttle bringing him back to Luna. He had spent the journey back from the Caliban fiasco in contemplative silence, isolating himself from the crew of the nameless vessel that crept into the Dark Angels domain before slinking away like a thwarted thief.

The abject failure of the mission weighed heavily on Loken, and he had struggled with his part in it through the long, cold nights in the dark heart of the vessel. He was a warrior who had turned his back on war, a man without colours or a Legion to call his own. In the depths of his despair, he had believed himself to be a Legion of one.

Nathaniel Garro had shown him that was no longer the case.

He no longer fought alone, but he cared nothing for the warriors who stood with him. The brotherhood of his former life was no more than a ghost memory now. None of the easy banter he'd shared with Vipus and Torgaddon leavened the times between engagements, only cold hard mission briefings and grim talk of their shadow war.

A shadow war in which he no longer wished any part.

Seated in the back of the shuttle with Iacton Qruze, Loken had felt cramped and claustrophobic, deeply uncomfortable at sharing so confined a space with another refugee from his Legion. Qruze had sensed his discomfort and known enough not to intrude on Loken's solitude. Only as the shuttle banked during its crossing of the Sinus Honoris did Loken notice the glinting diamond of the biodome on the edge of the Mare Tranquillitatis. No sooner had he blink-clicked the selenographic coordinates than the dome was lost to sight as the shuttle spiralled in on its final approach to the Somnus Citadel.

Built on the haunches of the Palus Somni, the fortress of the Silent Sisterhood rose from the uneven, rocky terrain on the north-eastern edge of the great basin. A soaring tower of brass and crystal, its myriad docking bays were arranged one atop the other like the lairs of undersea creatures in a spire of coral. Their scale was impossible to judge, but Loken knew each was large enough to accommodate the sisterhood's nigh-invisible black ships. Unlike the rest of Luna's surface, the surface of the Palus Somni was the shade of bleached tan, its

hue different from any of the moon's other plains or mountain regions.

Dorn had been waiting for them.

Already appraised of the mission's outcome by astropathic means, the primarch of the Imperial Fists had, nevertheless, taken time from the dismantling of his father's bejewelled palace to hear the ill news from Caliban first-hand. Loken had seen Lord Dorn's hope that the imperfect medium of astropathic communication had missed some subtle nuance to Qruze's report, some sign that the Lion's warriors of Caliban could be counted on to rally to the Emperor's banner.

Dorn would return to Terra none the wiser, and Loken's heart had broken at disappointing him.

Loken remembered the first time he had seen Rogal Dorn, deep in conversation with the Warmaster. He had seemed titanic then, a demigod built to match the strength and prowess of Horus himself; no small admission for a warrior of the Luna Wolves to make. Clad in golden plate and seemingly carved from the solid core of a mountain, the primarch had made Loken feel like a specimen pinned to an examination table, scrutinised by a being who understood everything about him in a heartbeat.

Dorn was still that demigod, but Loken saw he was somehow… *diminished*, as though the burden he took upon his shoulders was growing heavier by infinitesimal fractions every second. Like the trickle of water that over millions of years splits the mountain, Dorn's role as Terra's Praetorian was one that would already have crushed a lesser being.

How long might it take to crush a warrior like Dorn?

That debriefing had been kinder than the first to which he had been subjected. He had been brought to the Somnus Citadel as a broken, wretched thing; a madman Nathaniel Garro had dug out of the ruins of Isstvan III. Loken now understood that he had been closer to death during that interrogation than any other time in his life, though those who wished him gone did not come with blades, bolts or orbital bombardments; they came with doubts and fear and suspicion.

Was he to be trusted? Could anyone – even a Space Marine – have survived what he survived? Had he been left in the ruins by their enemies for Garro to find? Was Garviel Loken a ticking time bomb left by Horus, primed to inveigle himself into the Imperial ranks only to wreak untold havoc in the days to come?

No one knew for certain, but powerful men had spoken for him: Garro and Malcador for certain, and – Loken suspected – Lord Dorn himself. But others –

he never knew their identities – declared him a danger, a potential spy or worse. What followed was an indeterminate period of pain and misery, inflicted on his body and the depths of his mind to seek answers to those questions.

That he still lived was not seen as definitive; merely that his interlocutors hadn't found anything damning enough to go against the wishes of the Regent of Terra and the Emperor's golden-armoured Praetorian.

The Caliban mission had been authorised by Lord Dorn and was… what? Penance? A test of his loyalty? At every stage of that mission, Loken had the sense of a pistol being aimed at his head. He had understood in the way that only men of violence know, that Qruze was to be his executioner if his fealty proved false.

With statements delivered to Dorn and numerous faceless functionaries, Loken had followed his snapshot coordinates to the biodome, taking the rusting hulk of a Cargo-5 onto the Lunar surface, past ancient ruins of the first colonies to spring up on Terra's moon and a site marked with an eagle banner that commemorated some great achievement of a distant age.

That the dome was still functional was Loken's first surprise. That life still flourished within was his second. Overgrown to the point of needing a slash and burn campaign to return it to any form of order, Loken had felt a measure of calm in the flickering light of the glitching entoptics. Blue skies shimmered above, broken by portions of starlight and tantalising hints of the iron-clad world above. The riotous foliage grown to gigantic size reminded him of a world he had once trod, a place of blistered skies and thick-bladed stalks of fibrous material. It was a world that bore a name of violent death, but he found he could no longer remember it.

Loken had taken it upon himself to restore the garden to its former grandeur.

Kill for the living and kill for the dead…

Those had once been the words by which he had lived.

He thought he might even have sworn an oath to that effect once. He'd seen that moment as if from the point of view of an observer, though he didn't know how that could be possible. Had he experienced that moment at all or was it a phantom pseudo-memory?

A name sighed upwards into his consciousness at the thought of that moment – *Keeler* – but it held no meaning for him any more. Was it a person or a place?

Loken no longer knew and, in truth, no longer cared.

Once a killer, now he would be a custodian of living things.

Spiders crawled from the dark earth, and Loken crushed them where he saw them. Some, the smarter ones, kept out of the light and dug down deeper, but Loken's trowel scooped them from their hiding places and killed them anyway. There would be nests beneath the soil, and he needed to kill the offspring of the spiders too. Anything less than total extermination would simply allow the canker beneath the surface to grow unseen until it was too late to stop.

'You know that if you kill all the spiders, you'll just inherit their work, yes?' said a voice drifting across the koi lake.

Loken looked up, instantly alert. The speaker stood thirty metres away in the shadow of the weeping trees at the lakeside, but his powerful voice had not diminished in the intervening distance.

'Why do you say that?' he asked.

The figure stepped from the shadows to kneel at the water's edge, and Loken saw he had the bulk of a legionary, though not one he recognised. These days, most faces were a blur to him, an assemblage of features that held no meaning, bereft of the visual cues that could differentiate them. He had taught himself mnemonics to recall the people that now mattered in his limited sphere of existence, but this warrior conformed to none of his self-imprinted memes.

And yet there was something maddeningly familiar to this figure.

The entoptics woven into the dome's structure flickered and a perfectly circular reflection of Terra glimmered in the black mirror of the water. Loken felt his hostility at this intrusion into his domain lessen at the sight of the planetary bauble, as though it reminded him of a once perfect moment never to come again.

'Spiders kill the aphids and other pests that devour the plants,' said the man, skipping a flat stone across the lake and grinning broadly as it smacked on a rock on the other side. The reflected image in the water broke into splinters of pale light. 'You might not like the look of them – they're not too pretty after all – but they're waging a war for you even if you can't see it.'

The man's tone was laconic, but Loken saw past it to the dangerous core beneath, though, oddly, he felt no threat from him.

'Do I know you?' asked Loken, rising from his labours and wiping his knees of dirt.

'You don't recognise me?'

Loken hesitated before answering. 'I might if you came closer.'

'I think I'm fine as close as we are for now,' said the man, circling around the pool. He bent to choose another flattened stone from the lakeside and turned it

over in his hands. Satisfied with its heft, he skimmed it across the water towards Loken. The stone bounced and skipped across the surface of the lake before striking an angled rock and arcing into the air.

Loken reached up to catch the stone, but it smacked into his palm and bounced away before he could close his fingers over it. The pain was momentary, but it galled him that he'd failed such an easy feat of dexterity. A dirty purple bruise formed on his skin.

'You used to be quicker,' said the man.

'I used to be a lot of things,' replied Loken.

'Very true,' agreed the stranger.

'You know me, but you still haven't told me who you are,' said Loken. 'If you're another of Malcador's "counsellors" then you should turn around and leave. I owed it to Lord Dorn to go to Caliban, but I've no time for the Sigillite's half-truths and subterfuge. I no longer want a part in his schemes within schemes, so he should stop sending his lackeys for me. Though I should be grateful that at least he's sent a legionary this time.'

'He sends mortals to try and understand the mind of a legionary?' said the man, with a shake of the head that conveyed his amusement at such an idea. 'They really don't understand us at all, do they? But to set your mind at ease, I'm not here to summon you and I'm no counsellor, though I've dispensed my share of battlefield wisdom. Bolter *bon-mots*, you might call them.'

The quip seemed to amuse the man and he laughed aloud, though Loken was beginning to tire of the stranger's obtuse answers. He hooked the trowel to his belt and followed the path that led to the steps cut into the rocks by the waterfall.

'Leaving already?' asked the man, moving along a parallel path.

'If you won't even tell me your name then I have no interest in continuing this discussion.'

'Is my name really that important?'

Loken paused at the bottom of the steps. He felt that he *should* know this man's name, and that, yes, it *was* important he know it. It felt as though much depended upon that revelation.

'How can I trust you if I don't know your name?'

'You already know it. Why should I tell you it again?'

'I don't know it,' spat Loken, his hands curling into fists. He was unarmed, but a warrior of the Legions had no need of weapons when it came to killing.

'You do,' said the man. 'You've just forgotten it.'

'Then I've forgotten it for a good reason.'

‘No,’ said the man. ‘For all the wrong reasons. It was the only way to survive on Isstvan Three, but you’re not on Isstvan Three any more. The Warmaster tried to kill us there, but he failed. Well, for one of us at least.’

The entoptics flickered again, and something on the underside of the dome’s cupola blew out in a shower of sparks. They rained down onto the water, fading as they fell, and once again the reflected image of Terra appeared on the lake’s surface as the skin of the dome became transparent.

‘You were on Isstvan Three?’ said Loken as the figure emerged into the glow from the lake’s surface.

A cold hand clenched his heart as the man’s previously unknowable features resolved into those of a brother from a previous life.

‘I still am,’ said Tarik Torgaddon.

They sat on the ridge overlooking the lake, two brothers separated by a yawning gulf of regret and mortality, yet Loken felt as if no time at all had passed since last they had spoken. Torgaddon reclined upon an upright flat stone topped with a crescent arch and toyed with a loose thread on his robes that frayed the more he pulled at it.

‘How are you here?’ asked Loken.

Torgaddon shrugged. ‘You tell me.’

‘I saw you… I saw you die,’ said Loken. ‘Little Horus killed you.’

‘Aye, I think he did,’ said Torgaddon, pulling down the collar of his robes and probing his neck with his other hand. The fingertips came away red, and Torgaddon licked the blood away. ‘Still, could be worse.’

Loken wanted to laugh at such a ridiculous statement.

‘How,’ he said, ‘could it be worse?’

‘Well, I’m here, aren’t I?’ said Torgaddon. ‘Talking to you.’

‘And how exactly is that possible? The dead don’t rise from their graves.’

‘I seem to recall something of that on Davin’s moon,’ pointed out Torgaddon.

‘I suppose,’ agreed Loken. ‘In fact I seem to remember hauling your sorry arse out of a swamp as a bunch of dead men were dragging you down.’

‘You see? These days, death isn’t the handicap it used to be.’

‘Don’t be glib,’ said Loken. ‘I don’t know what caused the dead of the plague moon to fight. A pathogen, or some cerebral parasite maybe.’

‘Come on, you don’t really believe that,’ said Torgaddon. ‘You’ve been reading too many of Sindermann’s old books again, haven’t you?’

‘Maybe I don’t believe that, but I know people who had their heads cut off

don’t get up and start walking around and talking to old friends.’

‘I’ll admit it’s a puzzler,’ agreed Torgaddon.

Loken reached out to touch Torgaddon’s arm, and the limb he grasped felt as real and as solid as his own. He felt the rough fabric of his brother’s sackcloth robes and the steel-trap strength in the musculature beneath. His hand came away black with ash, and he rubbed it clean on the grass.

‘Am I still on Isstvan Three?’ asked Loken. ‘Did I die there too? Did Garro kill me, or am I still alone, still *Cerberus*?’

‘Cerberus?’

Loken shook his head, embarrassed. ‘A war name I think I took for myself.’

‘Guardian of the underworld,’ said Torgaddon. ‘Appropriate enough, I suppose.’

‘I thought you’d know that.’

‘I know just what you know,’ said Torgaddon. ‘And what you know is… patchy, shall we say?’

Understanding dawned on Loken. ‘Ah, so you’re a figment of my imagination? Some memory my damaged mind has conjured up.’

‘Maybe,’ agreed Torgaddon. ‘You straight up and down types do like to punish yourselves.’

‘Punish?’

Torgaddon nodded and leaned forwards. Loken caught the pungent reek of his brother’s blood and the choking dust of smashed building parts mixed with the chemical stink of explosives and the burned metal smell of war. He gasped as he relived the moment of his awakening, trapped beneath thousands of tonnes of debris and wondering how he was still alive.

‘Why else would you think of me except to punish yourself?’ asked Torgaddon, staring right into the heart of him. ‘You let me die. You watched Aximand take my head, and you didn’t stop him. He killed your closest battle-brother and you didn’t hunt him down and kill him for what he did. How can you call yourself my friend while that treacherous bastard still breathes?’

Loken pushed himself to his feet and walked away from Torgaddon, standing at the edge of the waterfall and staring down into the water forty metres below. The fall might not kill him, but the rocks at the bottom were like the sharpened teeth of a half-submerged leviathan and would certainly break a good many of his bones. How long would it be before anyone came to find him here? Long enough for the water to turn red with his blood? Long enough for him to die?

‘I wanted to hunt them all down. I wanted to kill every last one of them,’ he

said at last. ‘But… there was no way off Isstvan. Everyone was dead. I was trapped on a world of death.’

‘The dead who rose up, I might point out,’ said Torgaddon.

‘I… I lost my way for a time,’ continued Loken as if he hadn’t heard Torgaddon. ‘I was so consumed by the need to *kill* that I lost sight of what it was I needed to kill.’

‘Then Garro came and brought you back.’

Loken nodded. ‘He convinced me I still had a duty, a debt to pay, but this isn’t the fight I was made for. I can’t fight in the shadows, Tarik. If we’re going to beat the Warmaster, then it has to be out in the open. He has to be *seen* to be defeated, so that everyone knows it.’

Torgaddon got up and smoothed down his robes, the fraying thread still hanging from his sleeve.

‘You said “*if*” you beat the Warmaster,’ said Torgaddon. ‘You don’t think it can be done?’

‘You were a Luna Wolf, Tarik,’ said Loken, rubbing a hand across his face as a tremendous wave of weariness swept through him. ‘You know as well as I do that he’s the most dangerous man in the galaxy. There’s a reason Horus was made Warmaster and not any of the others. He’s the best at what he does, and what he does is make corpses of his enemies.’

‘So that means you *shouldn’t* fight him?’

Loken shook his head. ‘No, of course he has to be fought.’

‘Just not by you?’

‘What do you mean?’

Torgaddon ignored Loken’s question and spread his arms, turning on the spot to encompass the entirety of the garden.

‘You’ve worked wonders here, Garvi,’ said Torgaddon. ‘It’s just like I remember it.’

‘What is?’

Torgaddon cocked his head to one side and stared quizzically at him. ‘You really don’t see it?’

‘See what?’ said Loken, growing tired of Torgaddon’s constant evasion.

‘This place? You don’t recognise what you’ve built here?’

‘No.’

‘Sixty-Three Nineteen?’ said Torgaddon as though teasing the memory out, like a timorous animal coaxed from its burrow by soft words and the promise of food. Loken looked down at the garden, now seeing it for what it was: the square

shallow basins surrounded by flagstone pathways, the weeping trees and the bright flowers gathered at the water's edge. Memory surged, and he gasped as the full force of it tore into the fractured synapses of his mind.

When he'd first come here, none of this had existed. The enclosed biodome had been a tangled, overgrown mess that looked like it needed a flamer team or a destroyer cadre to tame it. But Loken had rebuilt it, hacking away the fibrous masses of dying flora and dumping it outside the dome. Working in his battle armour for days at a time, he'd fought the unwinnable fight against the rampant overgrowth of weeds and uncontrolled expansion of climbing plants. And he had brought the garden back to life, using a well-borer drill to cut giant flagstones from the Mare Tranquillitatis and hauling them inside to lay the paths around the pools he'd dug.

Everything that now existed within this dome had been wrought by his hand, and now he saw that, he understood why every little thing was freighted with familiarity.

'The water garden,' said Loken, tears misting his eyes. 'This is where I took the Mournival Oath.'

'And do you remember what you swore?' said Torgaddon, putting a hand on Loken's shoulder. 'You pledged to serve the Emperor above all primarchs. To uphold the truth of the Imperium of Mankind, no matter what evil might assail it. To stand firm against all enemies, alien and domestic.'

'I remember,' said Loken.

'You swore to be true to the Mournival to the end of your life,' said Torgaddon.

'The Mournival is broken,' said Loken. 'Ezekyle and Aximand saw to that.'

'Very well, to the *ideals* of the Mournival then.'

Loken nodded. 'This was the last moment I felt we were on the verge of something incredible.'

Torgaddon. 'Aye, it was. And now you know that, you know you can't stay here.'

Loken's mind was afire with all that came after that moment: the war on Murder; the blood spilled from misunderstanding upon the home world of the interex; the horror of Davin; the slaughter of the Auretian Technocracy; and the final, monstrous betrayal on Isstvan III. He'd known all this, he'd always known it, but had found a way to keep it locked away in the depths of his mind.

Loken dropped to one knee, overwhelmed by the surge of suppressed memory.

'I remember it all,' he whispered. 'I didn't want to. I tried to forget, but it looks like I can't.'

‘It’s like the dead things at the bottom of the sea,’ said Torgaddon. ‘Maybe they were tied to anchors or boulders, but somehow things got rotted up and those dead things are floating up to the surface. We never knew they were there all along, but we’re seeing them now.’

Loken looked up at Torgaddon, who held out a hand to him.

‘You’ve hidden here and lied to yourself for too long, Garvi. It’s time you got back in this war, whether you fight in the shadows or the light of day. Right now, the Imperium has foes in both. You’re going to have to go down the hole and see how dark it gets, and I warn you it’s going to get very dark indeed before this is over.’

Loken took Torgaddon’s hand and let the big man pull him to his feet.

‘I told you, I’m not built for this kind of fight,’ he said.

‘You’re built for every kind of fight,’ said Torgaddon. ‘You know this and you need to stop thinking as if the Imperium is on the back foot. You’re a Luna Wolf, and nothing is more dangerous than a cornered wolf.’

‘So you think we’re cornered?’

‘All right, maybe that wasn’t the best expression,’ admitted Torgaddon. ‘But you know what I mean. Strong enemies know when you’re weak. That makes them hungry, and that’s when they come for you. So what do you do?’

‘Don’t let them know you’re weak.’

‘Or better yet, don’t *be* weak,’ said Torgaddon. ‘Be strong. I remember something the Warmaster said back in the day, you know, back before everything went to shit. He said that man has control of action alone, never the fruits of the action. Take control of *your* actions, Garvi. Remember that when things look their worst, you can only do what you think is right at the time.’

Loken heard the clatter of the airlocks on the far side of the dome.

‘I have to go now,’ said Torgaddon, holding out his hand again.

Loken looked at the proffered hand, but didn’t yet take it.

‘Are you really here or is this just my mind’s way of convincing me to do something I know I have to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ confessed Torgaddon. ‘Either explanation sounds unbelievable, but what do I know? I had my head cut off.’

‘Don’t joke, Tarik,’ said Loken. ‘Not now.’

‘I don’t know what to tell you, Garvi,’ said Torgaddon, suddenly serious, and the transformation was as unsettling as anything else Loken had experienced recently. ‘I don’t have a neat explanation all tied up with a bow. I feel real, but I think something terrible happened to me after I died.’

‘*After* you died?’ said Loken. ‘What could be worse than dying?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ said Torgaddon. ‘But I think you’re the only one who can undo it.’

Loken heard footsteps drawing near, the harsh ring of armoured boots telling him that another legionary was approaching. He looked back along the path, seeing a long, broad-shouldered shadow thrown out over the flagstones, and closed his eyes. He wanted this all to be a dream, but knew it was all too real and all too hideous to be so easily dismissed.

When he opened his eyes, Torgaddon was gone, if he had ever really existed.

Loken let out a breath that felt as if it had been caught in his chest for an eternity, as a warrior armoured in steeldust war-plate without Legion markings rounded the corner. Iacton Qruze, once known as the half-heard of the Luna Wolves, now one of Malcador’s Knights Errant, nodded in respect to Loken and held up a hand in greeting.

Loken returned the gesture and said, ‘Qruze, what brings you to the garden?’

‘You are summoned,’ said Qruze. ‘And this time you need to answer.’

‘Who summons me?’

‘Malcador,’ said Qruze, as though there could be no other summoner.

‘Then I will come,’ said Loken.

‘You will?’ said Qruze, apparently surprised by Loken’s answer.

‘Yes,’ said Loken, bending to lift a flattened stone from the waterfall’s edge. ‘Give me a moment.’

He hurled the stone out over the lake, smiling in satisfaction as it skipped and bounced over the water, before ricocheting back into the centre of the pool to land in the reflected image of the Solar System’s precious third planet.

Qruze watched the stone’s trajectory with a curious expression.

‘What was that all about?’ he asked at last.

‘Something Torgaddon and I did on the shores of a water garden’s lake one time,’ said Loken. ‘He could never master it, but I always managed to get stones further than anyone else.’

Qruze nodded, though Loken’s answer was plainly meaningless to him.

‘What’s that on your hand?’ asked the half-heard.

Loken looked down and smiled as he saw a bruise turning to yellow in the shape of a gibbous moon on the palm of his hand.

‘A reminder,’ said Loken.

‘A reminder of what?’

‘Something I still have to do,’ said Loken.

Garviel Loken, now in service to the Sigillite

PATIENCE

James Swallow

It is not a lie to say that I expect to find my former commander dead amidst the wasteland we have made of Nolec Trinus.

The bombardment of the northern continent by twenty thousand Imperial artillery batteries has turned every inch of it into murdered grey earth and heaps of rubble, tilled by a week-long rain of ordnance. How must the Noleci have felt to see their sky blacken as a wall of shells descended? I wonder, in those brief seconds before the first of them landed, did the Noleci realise the depth of their betrayal? Did they understand that this was the consequence of their choice?

They all died, of course, as was fitting. The last of them – those few that managed to survive – emerged from deep-earth bunkers set many kilometres beneath the surface, and attacked us with all their might. We gave them the end they craved. We silenced their cries of hate with our guns.

This is not the first world I have stood upon where a populace has sided with the Arch-traitor Horus. I regret that it will not be the last.

We are walking now, up the hill of rubble that is all that remains of Nolec's First City. It weathered the attack best, having been protected by a massive void shield – but even that eventually failed under the iron rain. It is just as dead as everywhere else, but here you can actually make out the stubs of shattered buildings, where elsewhere the heaps of cracked stone hint at nothing.

I lead. Following me is the lieutenant and his platoon. They are as drab in their armour as I am in mine. It's the dust, you see. It coats everything.

I glance at him, the ruby eye-slits of my beaked helm scanning the hard planes of his face. The dust makes him a ghost. It flattens his features, rendering him nondescript. The dried blood from his wounds is caked with it too, as are the

blood-smeared faces and breastplates of all his troopers. The Noleci tried very hard to take us with them to their graves.

Only the winged skull across the brow of the lieutenant's headgear seems to stand out. Before landing here with me, he looked like a man. And before that, before he accepted the same bargain that I did, he looked like any other soldier of the Imperial Army.

But now he and I are different. Our colours have been bled from us. We are grey. The Regent of Terra plucked us from the continua of our lives; he made these men into his elect, dubbing them as his Chosen.

And I? There is no name for what I am. *Fallen son? Dusk Raider? Loyalist? Death Guard?* I am all and none of those things. I am only Helig Gallor.

The lieutenant and his soldiers call me a 'Knight Errant'. It suffices.

'Look there,' says one of the troopers. She's pointing through the wreathes of smoke that wash over the land. 'A ruin.'

I am almost amused by her words. This whole world is a ruin. But then my genhanced vision picks out what she has seen, clearer and sharper, and I understand. Against all possibility, something is still standing. Wary, I raise my bolter and approach.

It is not an illusion. Pieces of some great basilica actually remain. In fact, as I come closer, I see stained glass in the tall, arched window frames. The depictions there – impossibly, still intact – are full of idolatry and pious imagery of the Emperor of Mankind at his great works. They are intricate things, made with a zealot's love.

The Word Bearers built it, a lifetime ago when the XVII's devotion to the Master of Mankind was at its terrible height – before Khur, before Monarchia, and the chastisement of their primarch. I wonder how it was allowed to stand after that. Or indeed, how these remnants still stand now. It must have been at the very epicentre of the void shield, the most protected part of the most protected city on Nolec Trinus.

But no matter. It is a ruin now.

The troopers fall into a phalanx behind me. They are well trained, and we have done this before. Lasguns come to the ready and I direct them with silent battlesign gestures. We believe we are prepared for any advent of horrors.

And that is when I see him.

Alive, then. He stands there, as grey as the rest of us, as bleak and stony as the ashes about him. I have seen statues with more animation to them. A ripped cloak crackles briefly as the wind catches it, burned and torn as mute evidence of

a battle hard-fought. That unvoiced story shows in scars over his armour and the dulled gold of the eagle cuirass that differentiates his wargear from mine. He rests upon a great sword that is streaked with the blood of monsters.

I know he hears us coming. I imagine he heard our approach long before we saw him. His head is bare and he is *listening*. For what, I am not certain, until the smoke rises like a curtain and the rest of the scene is revealed.

The Chosen of Malcador are hard souls, brave men and women gathered from some of the most brutal warzones in the galaxy.

And yet, as one, they balk at the sight of the *thing*.

I have no words for what the creature is. I will call it a *dragon*, because that is the name of a terror that I recall from legends of old. But it is not that. No logic of evolution or tale of fancy could ever have spawned something so grotesque, so utterly twisted and sickening. It is an assembly of talons and wings, eyes and teeth, scales and fur. Collected from a million nightmares, it should never exist. But mercifully, it appears to be quite dead.

The dragon-thing lies in a lake of its own ichor, and I gather from the myriad cuts upon the beast's flesh that it was the sword that ended it.

I have seen things like this before. I regret that this will not be the last.

I advance, warning the lieutenant to stay back with a nod of my head. I address the warrior we have come to find. 'My lord Battle-Captain–'

He does not let me finish.

'*Patience*.' The word is an admonishment. His tone is one of a tutor towards a novice acting out of turn. He sniffs the air. Is that a faint smile on his lips?

Despite myself, I hesitate. I draw a breath. I begin again.

'Captain Garro. I am Gallor, tasked by the Sigillite to ascertain your status. We have not heard from you in many days. Why did you not answer your vox, my lord?'

Garro does not look away from the dead monster. 'Damaged. The venom of the daemon corrodes like acid. It ruined my helm and I was forced to discard it.' One gauntleted hand leaves the top of his resting sword. He beckons me. 'I could not return. Not yet.'

'My lord? I do not understand.'

I was not there when the dragon first appeared, ripping its way out of a shrieking hole in reality, but I have been told of Captain Garro's response. Of how he alone teleported down here from a ship in orbit, the bombardment still in progress, to find it and kill it. He was not expected to survive, and the cannonade was not going to be stopped for one warrior of the Legiones Astartes, even if he

was Malcador's Agentia Primus.

I came here out of duty, in search of proof of his death, in part because we are both Knights Errant, but also because he and I share more than that. We are… We *were* Death Guard. Sons of Mortarion, scions of the XIV Legion in better days. I thought it fitting. Now he makes me feel foolish for assuming.

A scowl grows on my face. There is no time for this. The war goes on and we have no reason to be here. I stride to Garro's side and grab his arm. 'Captain. Our work is done on Nolec Trinus. Malcador's will has been met. We are to move on.'

'Is that so?' He looks at me for the first time. 'Helig Gallor. The mantle of the Errant fits you well. It has been a long time since we spoke. Before the flight from Isstvan, I believe.'

'Aye.' In truth, longer than that.

In my service to Garro's command of the Seventh Company of the Death Guard, I did little to draw the battle-captain's notice. It was only an accident of place that put me aboard the frigate *Eisenstein* when the Warmaster showed his treachery. And while I am grateful every day for being one of the seventy souls who escaped that madness, it has always seemed a quirk of fate that made it so.

He did not choose me. I was there because I was loyal.

I am here now for the same reason.

Garro was born of Terra, and I am a child of Barbarus, our primarch's adopted home world. It places distance between us, distance that the unity of Legion once masked. With that gone, with no connection between us but storm-grey armour, I feel less able to ignore the disparity.

'We will not leave here, not yet,' he says. 'The Death Guard have always been patient, brother. Exercise some of that patience now.'

My choler rises. I speak quietly, but with cold intent. 'I realise now that I stopped being a Death Guard when we were abandoned on Luna. When our Imperium declared us untrustworthy and made us prisoners in all but name. You were not there to see that, Captain Garro. Not all were given Malcador's blessing.'

'*You* were,' he says coolly. 'The Regent deemed you suitable, after a time.' The tone of his voice seems to suggest that Garro himself might not have made the same judgement.

And that is the end to whatever of my patience remains. I turn towards the lieutenant and cut the air with the blade of my hand. 'Break vox silence and contact the ship. Have them vector a Stormbird to this location. We have found

what we are looking for.' My gaze drifts back to Garro. 'It's time to quit this place.'

The lieutenant doesn't answer me. He's looking away, into the smoke-haze. As I see a creeping shock roll over the bloodied, battle-worn faces of the troopers at his side, I hear the sound of massive lungs taking a heavy, shuddering breath.

Garro moves, stepping back, the great sword coming up as if it weighs nothing. 'Patience rewarded,' he says, almost to himself.

I turn. The dragon-thing is coming back to life.

It was dead and now it is not. I am as certain of one state as I was of the other only a moment before.

My hands tense around my bolter. Once, I would have been shaken by such a thing.

Once. Not now. Not with all that I have seen.

It rises, shaking off the dust. Tentacles unfold from filth-caked orifices, mandibles snap and rheumy eyes blink open. A whip-like serpentine tongue invades the air, tasting it.

'It feasts on blood,' Garro explains, lecturing me once again. 'But it is greedy. One life is not enough to draw its interest.' He indicates the Chosen who have accompanied me, as they enter battle formation and charge their weapons. 'It will only fully inhabit its flesh vessel when there is a large enough mass of prey to attract it.'

I understand. One Space Marine is not enough to tempt the daemon's essence to manifest itself – but two of them, and a cohort of bloodstained Chosen, *are*. I see a warrior's need for battle in Garro's eyes.

'Join me in this,' he says. It is not an order, but an invitation offered to an equal.

I nod.

And, together, we kill the beast for the final time.

THE WATCHER

C Z Dunn

‘Please. We may not have much time.’

The Knight Errant quickens his pace at the urging of the former Mechanicum adept. It has been three minutes since Tharcadian Semuel entered Ison’s chamber within the fortress watch-post to tell him of the shuttle, and only five minutes since the craft had been forced to land.

‘What is it, Semuel?’ he asks calmly. ‘What has been returned to us?’

The red warning lights flashing in the hangar bay reflect from the metal that makes up more than half of Semuel’s body, his devotion to the cult of Mars apparent in every aspect of his appearance. He regards Ison through the slit of his visor, perma-grafted over his eyes with rivets bonded to flesh. Ison thinks it gives Semuel the aspect of an underhive thug or fringe world criminal, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Semuel is a good man – an honourable man, as Ison well knows.

‘My mind is open to you, Lord Ison. Take the information that you need.’

Lord. The word almost makes Ison wince. Once, long ago, he would have revelled in all the honorifics lavished upon him by mortal servants. Since childhood, his gifts have elevated him above other men and, by virtue of being born on a civilised world, he has not been made a pariah nor shunned or cast out for them.

But now he has made *himself* an outcast, even from his own former Legion.

‘That is selfless of you, tech-priest. But I would not put you through that sort of intrusion unless it were absolutely vital. Besides, it seems we are–’

Ison stops dead in his tracks.

‘Holy Terra!’ he gasps. ‘Is that… Is that a… *Space Marine*?’

The thing before Ison resembles a legionary no more than a piece of parchment folded to form wings might resemble a Thunderhawk. What the torn, bleeding remains *do* look like is meat – crudely butchered meat, left out to rot and spoil. Blood trickles down the side of the ammunition crates, upon which the Space Marine has been placed, from weeks-old wounds that refuse to clot. The weak beating of a secondary heart visible through the deep gouge in his ribs is the only other sign that he yet lives.

Semuel's fear is apparent, even in the artificial modulation of his vocaliser unit. 'What in the name of the Omnissiah could have done this? Xenos perhaps? I've heard tell that the greenskins are a ferocious and unrelenting–'

'No ork did this,' Ison assures him. 'I have seen the damage wrought by their kind. It is brutal, barbaric and without mercy. The violence they employ when battling a foe is without equal anywhere in the galaxy, and the damage they can inflict upon a body is beyond imagining.'

'Not that I doubt you, Lord Ison, but based on what you've just told me… what exactly is it that makes you think this *isn't* the handiwork of orks?'

Ison's reply is barely a murmur. 'Because he's still alive.' He rubs away dried blood from the stricken Space Marine's torso with his gauntlet, and traces the outline of one of the numerous deep cuts. 'You said that this was a message, Semuel. What made you say that?'

'The wounds. Some of them look like words.'

'And you thought orks did this?'

A series of clicks come from the tech-priest's cranial implants as he accesses stored data files. 'From my understanding of greenskin culture, crude pictograms are the basis of their language.'

Semuel gestures to the body, blink-clicking pict captures for later reference.

'There. Just below the throat.'

Fresh blood oozes from a puncture above the collarbone, and Ison forms a dam with his other hand to prevent it from flooding the wound. 'This isn't how orks operate. They don't send messages. They possess neither the intellect nor the malice to keep a prisoner on the threshold between life and death, carve his body with sigils and then send him back where he came from…'

'I don't think they sent him back,' Semuel replies, straightening. 'I think he did that himself. The controls of the shuttle are covered in bloody handprints. Human handprints.'

The Knight Errant sighs. 'I have been a Space Marine for nigh on two centuries. If there's blood on a legionary's hands, it isn't usually his own…' He

furrows his brow. ‘Which hand were the prints from? Left or right?’

‘Uhh… both. Why?’

‘Because without being crude, Semuel, this warrior only has one arm.’

‘Are you suggesting that–’

Semuel and the horrified deck crew recoil in shock as the wounded warrior takes a sudden gasp of the cold hangar air, bloody fluid gurgling in his chest.

A single word escapes his lips. ‘…*Iltahamara*…’

Ison recognises the language instantly. More importantly, he knows the word.

‘That’s Fenrisian.’

Had he not heard the utterance with his own ears, he would scarcely believe that the thing before him could be one of the sons of Russ, such is the extent of the desecration of the warrior’s body.

Semuel twitches uncomfortably. ‘A Space Wolf? What is he saying?’

Ison has fought alongside the Wolves twice before, the first time before he and his brothers had even been reunited with their own primarch. On the second occasion, Ison witnessed the combined wrath of their Legions and one other – the Legion that he believes the dying Space Marine is trying to identify.

‘*Nightfall*. It’s Fenrisian for nightfall.’

‘This is Sixth Legion shuttle *Rauha* calling the *Nightfall*. Acknowledge. Over.’

No reply came. Only the hiss and click of a monitored vox-channel.

Brutvald shrugged. ‘Perhaps our father’s brother does not like visitors, Fyodor. You know his reputation as well as I.’

Fyodor Stromgren knew Konrad Curze’s reputation better than Brutvald did, or any of his other brothers on board the shuttle. He had been there on Cortonis when the Allfather and the Night Haunter had annihilated the abhuman panteratine. And again, when they plunged further into the system to wipe out the human cultures who had allied with the xenos, refusing to bow to the Emperor’s will.

He had been there when Curze fought alongside the Blood Angels and the Wolves to burn the Grey Worlds, and once more when the Hunderax Autonomy fell. He had seen first-hand what Curze and his Legion were capable of, the depths to which they would sink to secure victory, the lines that they would cross without pause or thought.

‘Aye,’ he muttered. ‘And he knows the Sigillite’s authority. Even Curze would not defy the Regent.’

Despite Fyodor’s surety, Brutvald and the three other sons of Russ cast each

other sceptical glances. He opened the link again.

'This is Fyodor Stromgren of the Sixth Legion, *Einherjar* champion of the Nine Eastern Tribes. I am here on the orders of Malcador the Sigillite, Regent of Terra and Voice of the Emperor. I request permission to board the *Nightfall*. Acknowledge. Over.'

The small craft banked, its human pilot guiding it to run parallel with the *Nightfall*'s starboard side. The flagship's weapons lay idle, not registering *Rauha* as a threat.

'There. Look,' said Brutvald, jabbing a finger in the direction of a bright spot on the dark hull of the Night Lords lead vessel. The huge legionary's bulk and mane of pure white hair had earned him the nickname 'Yhethee' amongst the wolf-brothers of *Tra*, but his eyes were sharp.

Fyodor peered at the distant opening.

'The hangar bay doors are open and the landing lights are on. Do we have permission to come aboard? Repeat. Do we have permission to come aboard?'

Still, there was nothing but silence.

Brutvald placed a hand on Fyodor's pauldron. 'I have a bad feeling about this…'

Fyodor sighed. If they landed *Rauha* on board Konrad Curze's own ship without authorisation, then their actions could be considered an act of war. On the other hand, the hangar bay looked like it was prepared to accommodate an incoming vessel, and Fyodor's orders from the Sigillite were clear.

He turned to the pilot. 'Take her in.'

They manoeuvred cleanly around the projecting hull-plates of the *Nightfall*, and slipped through the containment fields protecting the marked hangar.

Through the viewports of the shuttle, the blackness of the void was replaced by the midnight shades of Legion armour – rank upon rank of Night Lords assembled to meet the incoming craft. At their head stood the Night Haunter, his visage devoid of emotion, his focus solely upon the tiny shuttle that had dared to board his flagship.

'By the Allfather,' Brutvald cursed under his breath. 'That must be half of Curze's Legion out there.'

Fyodor scanned the expanse of the hangar deck. 'No. A fifth at most. According to the fleet logs, they're heading for a system called Isstvan.'

'Never heard of it.'

Following the lines of the landing apron, the pilot engaged the final retros and put *Rauha* down in front of the waiting Night Lords. Fyodor rose from his seat.

‘Quickly, brothers. Ready yourselves. Let us not antagonise him further by keeping him waiting.’

The Fenrisians smoothed down the pelts at their shoulders, and adjusted their buckles and ornamentation. Though the Sons of Russ bore a reputation for being rough and ready, over time they had learned the importance of ceremony and appearance when it came to Legion matters. Their father had drilled them well enough that most warriors of the Rout would now make the effort without too much protestation.

A bolter slide was racked, chambering a single round.

Fyodor spun on his heel. Young Hreidersson stared back at him wide-eyed, like a small animal caught in the searchlights of disapproving looks from his four elders.

‘Have you run mad, pup? There are tens of thousands of Night Lords out there – led by the Night Haunter himself, no less – and you want to meet them with your bolter on show? No weapons, any of you. Not even a hunting blade.’

He drew his pistol and tossed it into the empty seat.

‘And let me do the talking.’

Fyodor marched down the ramp at the head of his pack, any apprehension he felt kept well in check, both in his body language and upon his face. The Night Lords pinned them with their gazes, like hungry prisoners eyeing scraps of rancid meat or tiny rodents that had ventured into their cell.

Without breaking stride, Fyodor’s four packmates formed a line at the base of the shuttle’s ramp, leaving him to advance closer to the waiting primarch. From beneath lank hair that covered his eyes, Konrad Curze regarded the legionary impassively.

When Fyodor was only a few paces away from the primarch, he halted and waited for the Lord of the Night to hail him.

No hail was forthcoming.

‘Greetings, Lord Curze. I am Fyodor Stromgren and this is my pack, in fealty to Tra of the *Vlka Fenryka*.’ He waited for a returned salutation, or any other response. The Night Haunter merely looked on, uninterested. ‘We are here at the behest of Malcador the Sigillite, Regent of Terra and Voice of the Emperor, and endorsed by the Wolf King of Fenris, Lord of Winter and War.’

Met again only by cold silence, Fyodor reached under the thick, white wolf pelt draped across his shoulders and produced a scroll. He held it out before him.

‘Our credentials should be to your satisfaction, Lord Curze. These are our

orders, bound with both the seal of the Wolf King and the sigil of Malcador.'

Long seconds passed but still the primarch made no move. Fyodor withdrew his arm and placed the rolled parchment back under his furs.

'My brothers and I were on our way back to Fenris when we received them, re-routing us to your fleet and assigning us to your Legion as observers. Lord Malcador has dispatched others of the Rout to–'

Curze's features split in a wide grin. He began to chuckle to himself, though the mirth was cold to Fyodor's ears.

The Night Lords began to stir, the ravenous glint in their eyes becoming like balefire as they advanced on Fyodor's pack.

'We are here with the authority of the Sigillite and the Wolf King,' he protested. 'The Emperor Himself has willed th–'

Fyodor's words were cut short by the first blade entering his flesh, followed in quick succession by another, and another. He swung his arm back, ready to deliver a blow to his assailants, but three Night Lords grasped hold of it, tearing his armour from him and dragging him to the floor.

Through the forest of armoured legs, Fyodor witnessed the demise of his packmates. Old Anek was the first to die, the veteran of almost two hundred wars bleeding out on the deck, the foes arrayed against him so many that he barely had a chance to fight back before he was down.

Hreidersson was next. Bereft of his armour, dozens of Night Lords had encircled him, taking turns to kick and punch, his muscular body becoming a tapestry of bruises and welts as his bones broke.

Anders Drakenvolk was the third of the pack to perish. Disobedient to the end, he had pulled the knife concealed in the folds of his cloak and had taken down three of the Night Lords before a single blow had been landed upon him. His resistance was short-lived, however, and a host of VIII Legion warriors pried the blade away from him before plunging it into his flesh, over and over again.

Brutvald died the best of them. Sensing what was about to happen, he had gone for Curze, barrelling through the press of dark ceramite that sprang up like a wall before him. The Night Lords punched and stabbed at him but still the massive legionary ploughed on, getting to within five metres of the Night Haunter before he was finally brought low.

The traitors dragged his corpse back to where the rest of the pack were being butchered, and dumped it alongside Fyodor. Brutvald's pure white hair was now stained crimson, and only a single dead eye remained in his head. Through the pain, Fyodor laughed weakly at the irony.

A cruel voice rang out over the din. ‘No. Keep that one alive.’

Fyodor felt a shadow fall over him, and an iron grip hauled him up from the floor.

The Night Haunter.

Pulling a blade from his belt, the primarch of the Night Lords began to carve a word into the legionary’s exposed flesh, still grinning like a madman. ‘This one still has a use…’

Ison severs the psychic link with the dying Space Wolf, the etheric feedback from the second-hand violence finally overwhelming him. Thick, dark blood trickles from his nostrils. He turns to look at Semuel with bloodshot eyes.

‘Curze. Curze did this.’

Semuel has no words. In the months since he fled Mars, he has witnessed many depraved and barbaric acts, atrocities that no man should ever see. But this… This is something altogether more horrifying.

Ison wipes away the blood from Fyodor’s forehead, revealing the word gouged into his flesh by the primarch’s blade. It is written in Low Gothic, in contrast to the others that defile the legionary’s remains, so crudely etched in Nostraman script.

Semuel accesses his internal data-link, searching for anything that might help.

‘We can still save him, Lord Ison! The sarcophagi I brought with me from Mars are yet to be transferred to the Othrys project. I could have him interred within the hour – we could keep him alive until the new Dreadnought frames have been completed!’

Ison cannot take his eyes from the crimson letters. ‘No. This is a true son of Fenris, born to roam the ice plains and the tundra. I have been inside his head, and this Wolf is not for caging.’

He carefully lifts what is left of Fyodor from the crates and cradles him in his arms. The grey of his Knight Errant’s armour stains red. It is pleasing to Ison. It reminds him that he no longer wears the colours of the Legion that he has abandoned, nor follows a primarch whom he detests to his very bones.

‘Run ahead to the medicae and brief the Apothecaries. Make them understand that his life is to be saved at all costs. That I, acting with the Sigillite’s authority, order it so.’

Semuel does not hesitate. He sets off from the hangar at pace.

Ison follows. The word – the Night Haunter’s message to the Sigillite, to the Emperor and to the Imperium as a whole – burns in his mind.

‘Stay strong, brother. Curze was right – you do still have a use. Just not the one he intended.’

AFTERWORD

There's a universal truth in writing, often agreed upon with a knowing nod by authors, directors, editors and the like across all creative industries and all genres. That is: some ideas spring forth, fully formed, on the first draft, while others you have to work at.

The concept of the Silent War is definitely a perfect example of the latter. Much like the struggle it references, no one was really sure what was happening with it in the beginning…

About three years ago, at a Horus Heresy author meeting, Chris Wraight and Aaron Dembski-Bowden were trying to work out which parts of the narrative hadn't been covered in much detail yet. There was a fuzzy, nebulous idea emerging around the table that perhaps, in the Emperor's absence, Rogal Dorn and Malcador were trying to achieve the same thing – the strengthening of the Solar System against invasion – but going about it in different ways, and just imagine what would happen if they inadvertently started working against one another. James Swallow had already done a lot of work with Malcador and his various agents throughout the Garro audio dramas, and Chris was already jotting down ideas for what would become 'The Sigillite'. Graham McNeill had recently shown us the dark underbelly of Terra in *The Outcast Dead*, and the sequel 'Wolf Hunt' was already well underway.

But there was this almost tangible feeling in the room that something was missing. This Terran 'cold war' was lacking something fundamental, something

to tie it all together.

John French, listening quietly and making notes as he so often does, murmured some rather profound, and ultimately rather prophetic, words. ‘Maybe it just needs a name. Something catchy that you could put on an anthology cover.’

He was absolutely right, of course. There are big concepts throughout the Heresy like ‘Isstvan’ and ‘Calth’ and ‘the Warmaster’. If you mention them, fans of the series instantly know what you’re talking about, or at least which part of the story it references. If we could just put a shorthand label on this new idea, then and there, in that very room, then it would be something that we could build upon more easily with each new plot line.

Several pairs of eyes fell upon Dan Abnett. He was flush with success from his and Aaron’s riffing on *The Unremembered Empire* as a project title (‘Imperium Secundus is… well, it’s an empire… that no one will remember by the 41st millennium. Hang on, I’ve almost got it…’ etc.) and so our expectations were high. Catchy titles have always been one of his many strengths.

After we rejected ‘Malcador and Dorn’s Big Secret Fight Bonanza’ and ‘War on Terra’ for obvious reasons, someone else suggested ‘The War of Silence’. This was quickly rendered down to ‘The Silent War’, and the whole thing just seemed to crystallise a little more in everyone’s minds.

It’s an evocative title, no? The silence actually speaks volumes.

A difficult part of the creative process on the Horus Heresy series can often be expanding twenty or more years of disparate little references from the wider Warhammer 40,000 background into a war that feels authentic. Or, at least, plausible. Never in the history of mankind has any war been fought and won on a single front, by two perfectly opposed and equally matched armies, with no fallout or reprisals. Why would that be the case in the future, then? The Horus Heresy did not (contrary to misguided-yet-apparently-popular opinion) begin at Isstvan III, jump to Isstvan V, swing through Prospero, Signus Prime and Calth before screeching over the finish line with the Siege of Terra. Aside from being a war that was fought in almost every populated system across the whole galaxy at one time or another, the Heresy lasted for over seven years – there would have been countless assassinations, propaganda campaigns, cyber-attacks, false flag operations, supply disruptions, aborted campaigns, precision strikes, terrorism, piratical raids, counter-insurgency and general sabre rattling from both sides.

You know. Like in real wars.

Dan was actually the first to broach this idea in the series, way back in his

novel *Legion*. It dealt with some of the less traditional methods employed by Alpharius and his sons, but also led to two slightly incorrect assumptions for a lot of readers: firstly that the Alpha Legion only engage their enemies in spec-ops and subterfuge; secondly that the Alpha Legion were the only group in the Imperium ever to do this. It's a standard military tactic, and the Legions *are* the military.

In compiling this anthology, I was also reminded just how much influence James Swallow's work has had on the rest of the Silent War. It was in *Nemesis* that he really prised the lid off, with Imperial Assassins and rogue operatives working behind enemy lines and information itself being used as a weapon. It made a lot of sense, therefore, for him to revisit some of his older characters and see how they might fit into this new kind of struggle. The face of the Imperium is changing, and the Knights Errant are far from the only new faction to emerge...

The complexity of the series has actually become a virtue in this endeavour – characters are confused and in the dark about a lot of things, just as the readers and authors (and editors) sometimes are, at least to begin with. It can take a bit of confusion over a particular plot line or an individual's motivations to highlight another great storytelling opportunity. The inspiration behind Anthony Reynolds' novella *The Purge* actually came out of a Q&A session at the Black Library Weekender in 2013, when someone asked why Sor Talgron was apparently allowed to roam free on Terra after the Word Bearers were declared traitors!

The story was certainly worth telling, tying in as it does to *The Flight of the Eisenstein*, *The Lightning Tower*, *The First Heretic*, *The Outcast Dead*, *Butcher's Nails* and *Betrayer*. Once again, it's another great tale that looks all the way back to the start of the series and addresses the unknown elements required to make the Horus Heresy more exciting, rich and diverse. Secret battles. Twisted allegiances. Contingencies put in place for the final battle.

All of this Silent War stuff has been around right from the start. We just didn't have a name for it back then.

And names have power. Just ask the Grey Knights.

When they come to exist, of course.

Laurie Goulding
December 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Domiciled in the East Midlands, **C Z Dunn** is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Pandorax*, the novellas *Crimson Dawn* and *Dark Vengeance* and the audio dramas *Trials of Azrael, Ascension of Balthasar, Terror Nihil, Bloodspire* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories.

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile, Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deathfire* and *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes *Vengeful Spirit* and his *New York Times* bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has

written the Time of Legends trilogy The Legend of Sigmar, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

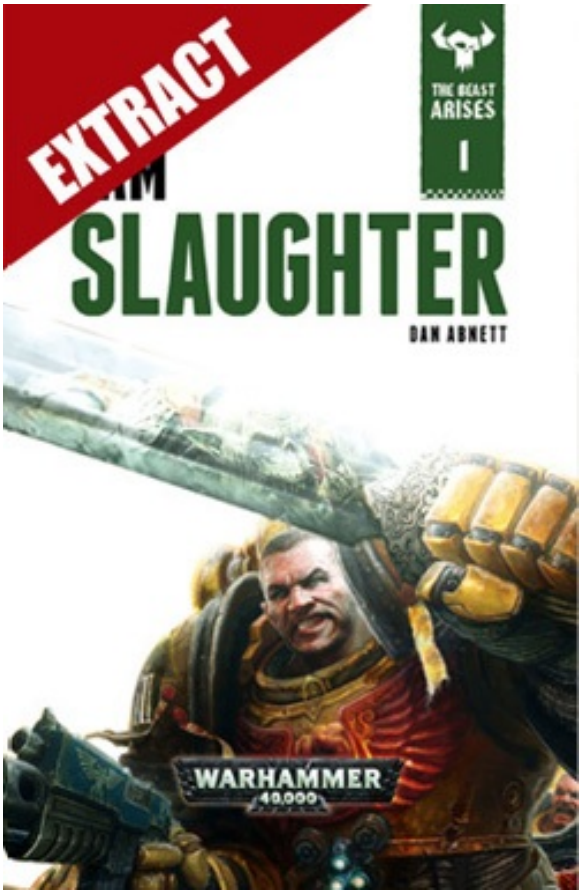
Anthony Reynolds is the author of the Horus Heresy novella *The Purge*, audio drama *Khârn: The Eightfold Path* and short stories 'Scions of the Storm' and 'Dark Heart'. In the Warhammer 40,000 universe, he has written the Space Marine Battles novel *Khârn: Eater of Worlds*, alongside the audio drama *Chosen of Khorne,* also featuring Khârn. He has also penned the Word Bearers trilogy and many short stories. Hailing from Australia, he is currently settled on the west coast of the United States.

Rob Sanders is the author of *The Serpent Beneath*, a novella that appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling Horus Heresy anthology, *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include the Warhammer 40,000 titles *Adeptus Mechanicus: Skitarius* and *Tech-Priest, Legion of the Damned, Atlas Infernal* and *Redemption Corps* and the audio drama *The Path Forsaken*. He has also written the Warhammer Archaon duology, *Everchosen* and *Lord of Chaos* along with many Quick Reads for the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in the city of Lincoln, UK.

James Swallow is best known for being the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the *New York Times* bestseller lists, *The Flight of the Eisenstein* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro. For Warhammer 40,000, he is best known for his four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and his two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris,* as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

An extract from *I Am Slaughter*.



The Chromes were relatively easy to kill, but they came in ferocious numbers.

Eight walls of Imperial Fists boxed one of their primary family groups into a scrub-sided valley east of the blisternest, and reduced them to burned shells and spattered meat.

Smoke rose off the hill of dead. It was a yellowish air-stain composed of atomised organic particulates and the backwash of fyceline smoke. According to the magos biologis sent to assist the undertaking, sustained bolter and las-fire, together with the chronic impact trauma of blade and close-combat weapons, had effectively aerosolised about seven per cent of the enemy's collective biomass. The yellow smoke, a cloud twenty kilometres wide and sixty long, drained down the valley like a dawn fog.

The magos biologis told Koorland this as if the fact had some practical application. Koorland, second captain of Daylight Wall Company, shrugged. It was a non-fact to him, like someone saying the shape of a pool of spilled blood resembled a map of Arcturus or Great-Uncle Janier's profile. Koorland had been sent to Throne-forsaken Ardamantua to kill Chromes. He was used to killing things. He was good at it, like all his company brothers and like every brother of the shield-corps. He was also used to the fact that when things were killed in colossal numbers, it left a mess. Sometimes the mess was smoke, sometimes it was liquid, sometimes it was grease, sometimes it was embers. He didn't need some Terra-spire expert telling him that he and his brothers had pounded the Chromes so hard and so explosively that they had vaporised part of them.

The magos biologis had a retinue of three hundred acolytes and servitors. They were hooded and diligent, and had decorated the hillside with portable detection equipment and analysis engines. Tubes sniffed the air (this, Koorland understood, was how the magos biologis had arrived at his seven per cent revelation). Picting and imaging devices recorded the anatomies of dead and

living Chrome specimens alike. Dissections were underway.

'The Chromes are not a high-factor hostile species,' the magos told Koorland.

'Really?' Koorland replied through his visor speakers, obliged to listen to the report.

'Not at all,' the human said, shaking his head, apparently under the impression that Koorland's obligation was in fact interest. 'See for yourself,' he said, gesturing to a half-flayed specimen spread-eagled on a dissection stand. 'They are armoured, of course, around the head, neck and back, and their forelimbs are well formed into digital blades–'

'Or "claws",' said Koorland.

'Just so,' the magos went on, 'especially in sub-adult and adult males. They are not harmless, but they are not a naturally aggressive species.'

Koorland thought about that. The Chromes – so called because of the silvery metallic finish of their chitin armour – were xenosbreed, human-sized bugs with long forelimbs and impressive speed. He thought about the eighteen million of them that had swarmed the valley that afternoon, the sea of silver gleaming in the sunlight, the swish of their bladed limbs, the *tek-tek-tek* noise they made with their mouthparts, like broken cogitators. He thought of the three brothers he'd lost from his wall during the initial overwhelm, the four taken from Hemispheric Wall, the three from Anterior Six Gate Wall.

Go tell them *not naturally aggressive*.

The Chromes had numbers, vast numbers. The more they had killed, the more there were to kill. Sustained slaughter was the only operational tactic: keep killing them until they were all dead. The rate at which the Imperial Fists had been required to hit them, the duration, the frenzy – no damn wonder they aerosolised seven per cent of their biomass.

'Chromes have been encountered on sixty-six other worlds in this sector alone,' said the magos biologis. 'Twenty-four of those encounters took place during compliance expeditions at the time of the Great Crusade, the rest since. Chromes have been encountered in large numbers, and have often defended themselves. They have never been known to behave with such proactive hostility before.'

The magos thought about this.

'They remind me of rats,' he said. 'Rad-rats. I remember there was a terrible plague of them down in the basements and sub-basements under the archive block of the Biologis Sanctum at Numis. They were destroying valuable specimens and records, but they were not, individually, in any way harmful or dangerous. We sent in environmental purge teams with flame guns and toxin

sprays. We began to exterminate them. They swarmed. Fear, I suppose. They came flooding out of the place and we lost three men and a dozen servitors in the deluge. Unstoppable. Like the sub-hive rats, the Chromes have never behaved this way before.'

'And they won't again,' said Koorland, 'because when we're finished here they'll all be dead.'

'This is just one of a possible nineteen primary family groups,' said the magos biologis. He paused. Koorland knew that the magos intended to address him by name, but, like so many humans, he found it difficult to differentiate between the giant, transhuman warriors in their yellow armour. He had to rely on rank pins, insignia and the unit markings on shoulderplates, and that information always took a moment to process.

The magos biologis nodded slightly, as if to apologise for the hesitation.

'–Captain Koorland of the Second Daylight Wall–'

'I'm second captain of the Daylight Wall Company,' Koorland corrected.

'Ah, of course.'

'Forget about rank, just try to remember us by our wall-names.'

'Your what?'

Koorland sighed. This man knew more than seemed healthy about xenosbreeds, but he knew nothing about the warriors built to guard against them.

'Our wall-names,' he said. 'When we are inducted, we forget our given names, our pre-breed names. Our brothers bestow upon each of us a name that suits our bearing or character: a wall-name.'

The magos nodded, politely interested.

Koorland gestured to a Space Marine trudging past them.

'That's Firefight,' he said. 'That brother over there? He's Dolorous. Him there? Killshot.'

'I see,' said the magos biologis. 'These are earned names, names within the brotherhood.'

Koorland nodded. He knew that, at some point, he'd been told the magos biologis' name. He hadn't forgotten because it was complicated, he just hadn't cared enough about the human to remember it.

'What is your name, captain?' the magos asked brightly. 'Your wall-name?'

'My name?' Koorland replied. 'I am Slaughter.'

Click here to buy *I Am Slaughter*.

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